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“In a Land of Myth and a Time of Magic”: The Role and Adaptability of the Arthurian Tradition in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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“In a Land of Myth and a Time of Magic”

The Role and Adaptability of the Arthurian Tradition
in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

By Sarah Wentz

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Introduction

The Myth of the King

Joseph Campbell, a man who popularized mythology in the United States, once said, “Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. ... We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are” (4). In this, Campbell reveals a simple and profound notion: myths are powerful devices, gateways to truth concealed in the fantastical realm of the story. The world of mythology results from our attempts to make sense of the mystery of life and is an indispensable tool for shaping our understanding.

In the sphere of mythology, one mythic narrative particularly interests me: that of King Arthur Pendragon. Arthur is a figure of legend, a warrior of the highest caliber, a man whose deeds are associated with heroism, chivalry, justice, and honor, a king who led Camelot to peace and prosperity. But above all, Arthur is a myth. His story has been told for thousands of years in a variety of places, during which time it has helped people understand their past and given them hope for their future. It is one of the greatest mythic traditions of our time, a source of personal fascination, and the subject of this thesis.

Though I am only twenty-one years old, I nevertheless feel like a latecomer to the Arthurian scene, as my journey with Arthur began rather recently. Like most of the general population, I had certainly heard of Arthur and Camelot and could give a rudimentary plot summary of the overarching narrative, but until a short time ago, I knew little of the finer details or side quests that populated the Arthurian universe. It was a good story, sure enough, but so was *Harry Potter*, and that proved much more effective at capturing my youthful imagination. I was a high school senior before I finally read T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, and though I

enjoyed the novel, I soon put it out of my mind. Arthur would not occupy a significant part of my life until I came to college, and there our relationship commenced in a rather interesting fashion.

My first year at St. Catherine University, I was introduced to a girl whose first words to me were something along the lines of, “Hi, I’m Rachel. Let me show you this TV show I love.” She led me to her computer, where she had loaded a video of a new British TV series called *Merlin*. We watched only about two minutes of the first episode – a section with the quirky initial meeting of Arthur and Merlin – but that was all it took. I was enchanted. While Rachel, a self-professed lover of queer theory, gushed about how the boys were (obviously) in love with each other, I mentally processed the fragment she had shown me, curious about the story that was unfolding even in that first episode. Recalling what I’d read in White’s novel, I could immediately tell that *Merlin* was doing something different in its interpretation of the Arthurian narrative, and I needed to know what was going to happen next. With the help of Rachel and few other friends, I found a way to watch the entire first season of *Merlin*, and in so doing entered into a love of all things Arthur.

Merlin was my gateway into the Arthurian world, and I soon found myself pursuing the myth with a passion. There always seemed to be a new interpretation of Arthur to find, and it did not take long for my shelves to fill up with other works featuring him – *The Mists of Avalon*, *Here Lies Arthur*, *The Seeing Stone*, *Camelot*, *Sword of the Rightful King*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *The Sword in the Stone*, *Shrek the Third*. I became excited every time I found a new Arthurian adaptation to explore, and as I kept returning to the myth, I gradually became attuned to its popularity – not just today, but throughout time. Arthur has origins in the oral traditions of Medieval Britain, yet variations of his story are still being composed today, thousands of years

later. This recognition, coupled with my fascination with *Merlin*, is what paved the way for this thesis.

Looking at all the Arthurian material I surrounded myself with, I asked the first of this projects' many questions: after nearly two-thousand years, why is Arthur still around? Arthur emerged as a British legend, but has since transcended these origins to be appropriated by multiple cultures and peoples. The immense staying power of the myth intrigued me, as did the new forms it continually takes. For the myth has not simply survived, it has thrived – every year, creative re-imaginings appear as books, movies, plays, comics, or TV shows. This multiplicity of forms led me to another question: what function does the Arthurian narrative serve? Each interpretation possesses its own affective power, and by examining how the myth operates in various societies – both past and present – I hope to understand what elements aid its longevity.

This thesis, by investigating key moments in the myth's history, seeks to reveal the fluidity of the Arthurian tales and identify some of the features that make them prevalent and influential across time. Part I will explore the development of the Arthurian tradition, identifying significant time periods and works of literature that contributed to the formation of the overarching legend. It should be noted that, because such a vast quantity of Arthurian material exists, I have had to be selective about what material to include and will be dealing with only a few influential works noted for specific additions to or variations of the myth.

Following the historical trajectory of the myth, Part II will discuss two key eras that illustrate how the myth has been appropriated and the ways it contributed to that particular time. The first section will consider the ideas of knighthood and the Holy Grail found in Nazi Germany, and the second will look at the Camelot myth of John F. Kennedy's presidency. Considering the Arthurian narrative in these contexts illustrates the power of myth to both reveal

truth and conceal it and provides an example of how this myth functions in relation to the needs of a particular time.

Part III will turn towards a contemporary work featuring Arthur and explore how it has been adapted for a modern audience. This includes considering how the myth is relevant to our age and what purpose it serves. In this section, I will analyze the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) television series *Merlin*, created in 2008. The show ran for five seasons, ending in 2012, throughout which it averaged an audience of over six million viewers and was sold to "over 50 broadcasters in 183 countries internationally" ("Merlin"). By indentifying the revisions and innovations made to the Arthurian myth in this show, I will posit the contemporary issues it addresses and compare the role it serves today to the roles played by the myth in the past. In conclusion, I will propose what makes the Arthurian narrative as adaptable and timeless as to be continually reinvented over thousands of years.

To begin, however, I will summarize the Arthurian story I will be working from. Though many can recount, or at the very least recognize, the main components of the Arthurian narrative – the Knights of the Round Table, Arthur's marriage to Guinevere¹ that ended when she cheated on him with Lancelot, and so forth – I believe that the interests of this project are best served by telling the story yet again. This is primarily because numerous versions of the stories exist, and there is no definitive Arthurian tale to act as a standard; no work serves as the ultimate version against which all others are judged. Each new work contributes unique elements to the narrative, all of which are valid and important to the mythic tradition. This means, however, that someone who reads T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* will have a different set of information from another person who reads Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. By retelling the story, I

hope to enact a functional standard for the sake of this thesis, to ensure everyone approaches the work with the same base of knowledge.

For this project, I will be using as a traditional rendition of Arthur's story the plot laid down in *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. Malory is often regarded as "the most famous contributor to Arthurian legend ... whose fifteenth century tales are considered by many to be a milestone both in the retelling of Arthur's legend and in the printing and book industries; Malory's work has influenced almost all authors of Arthurian literature who came after him" (Mersey 57). Both the reception of Malory's writing and the influence it has exerted over others are what I feel validate my use of his work as a base story. Malory's contributions to the Arthurian tradition will be further discussed in Part I.

It should also be noted that, for the sake of this project, I will be considering only the myths directly involving Arthur. The Arthurian tradition is vast, containing stories of Arthur as well as the exploits of his various knights, and to consider it in its entirety would be a daunting endeavor. To provide a more manageable focus for this work, I will be looking solely at the main branch of the myth that focuses on Arthur and those directly in contact with him. The only exception will be my brief consideration of the tale of Percival in the section regarding Nazi Germany. The summary that follows, therefore, includes only the relevant portions of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

The story begins when Uther Pendragon, King of England, falls in love with the Duke of Cornwall's wife, Igraine. Seeking to lie with her, Uther requests the help of the wizard Merlin, who disguises Uther as the Duke so that he can seduce Igraine. However, this enchantment comes with the condition that Merlin be given custody of the child resulting from the union, so when Arthur is born, Merlin gives him to one of Uther's subjects, Sir Ector, to be raised away

from the castle. While Arthur is living with Ector, Uther dies and leaves the throne empty, causing conflict over who is to succeed him as king. To solve the dilemma, Merlin summons all the lords of the land together in a churchyard where a fine sword is stuck in an anvil, bearing the words, “Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England” (Malory 9). Many try but cannot remove it, so a tournament is held in the hopes that the king will appear. Sir Ector and his son Kay attend this tournament with Arthur, but Kay forgets his sword and entreats Arthur to return home and fetch it. Unable to do so, Arthur instead goes to the churchyard and pulls the sword from the stone, thereby proving his heritage and birthright.

Though the lords protest Arthur’s kingship, Merlin establishes him as the new King of England and counsels him through many battles so he can prove his legitimacy to rule. To strengthen his role as king and despite Merlin’s warnings against it, Arthur marries Guinevere. As a dowry, Guinevere’s father gives Arthur the Round Table, leading Arthur to establish the fellowship of the Knights of the Round Table. Following his wedding, Arthur sets about stabilizing his court, and while doing so, he sleeps with King Lot’s wife (who he does not know is his half-sister) and begets Mordred, a son Merlin tells him will destroy him and his knights. In an attempt to prevent this, Arthur gathers all baby boys born in May – the month Merlin prophesized Mordred to be born – and puts them on a ship, sailing it out to sea. But the ship crashes against a castle and Mordred is saved, coming to Camelot at age fourteen to become a knight.

Soon after this, Merlin is sealed in a cave by his protégé, Nimueh, leaving Arthur to look to his own council to combat Morgan le Fay’s attempts to murder him. Arthur prevails over her, and travels to mainland Europe where he likewise triumphs over Rome’s armies and becomes

emperor of Rome. When Arthur returns to England, Lancelot, a Knight of the Round Table, falls in love with Guinevere, and the two begin an adulterous affair. Arthur knows of it, but ignores it because he loves both of them. Pressured by Mordred, however, Arthur exposes the affair, leading Lancelot to flee the kingdom. Guinevere is ordered to be burned at the stake for her treason, as is the law, but Lancelot rescues her before this can occur, killing many of Arthur's knights in the process. Though Lancelot returns Guinevere to Arthur, the other knights want vengeance for Lancelot's crimes, and they force Arthur to ride against him. While away battling Lancelot, Arthur hears that Mordred has usurped the throne and taken Guinevere as his wife. Arthur returns and meets Mordred in battle, where they kill one another. As he is dying, Arthur is taken to Avalon, an island known for its healing powers, to have his wounds tended, perhaps to come back to his kingdom one day.

But though Arthur goes to Avalon – as he does in many versions of his story – he never fades from the imagination of those he leaves behind. Similarly, the Arthurian myth never fades from the collective human imagination. As Michael Wood writes, “great myths that have been built up over hundreds of years don't just disappear. They last because their themes respond to something deep in the minds of their audience” (244). This resonating power is what allows me to study the myth today, and I know I will be returning to the Arthurian narrative long after this project is complete. There will always be new material to explore and new nuances to uncover, for as times change, so, too, will Arthur. I fully anticipate greeting these new adaptations with a stupid grin and a million questions because mythology will always be a part of my world. I have embarked on this thesis because I have been caught by the Arthurian myths, and that is why I continue to investigate them. I can only hope that this project will – at the very least – inspire others to consider the role Arthurian mythology plays in their understanding of the world.

Part I

Arthur in Ages Past

For a myth that would become a worldwide sensation, Arthur had rather humble origins. Before he was King of Camelot, he was a simple British folk hero, a warrior victorious in battle against Britain's enemies. Nevertheless, as times changed, the legend was forced to change as well. Keeping with Darwin's evolutionary theory, Arthur needed to adapt in order to survive, and, as Michael Wood notes,

the legend was often re-created in times of crisis and change. At the turn of the nineteenth century, modernity and industrial revolution were on the horizon. There was also a questioning of the past, especially of the old spiritual traditions of Britain and the loss of the pre-Reformation Catholic past. Through the myth ... nineteenth-century [Britons] were attempting to renew contact with the world from which they had been irretrievably separated by the Reformation. (244)

The centuries that make up the Arthurian tradition are filled with challenges much like those Wood cites above, and examining the history of the myth provides a larger perspective on how it changed to become what we see today. The Arthurian narrative has fulfilled a variety of roles since its creation, and its development over time reveals how it has been adapted for various audiences and how these adaptations served to enforce diverse ideas.

Historically, Arthur can be seen primarily filling two roles, that of a nationalistic warrior and that of a romantic entertainer, both of which developed in response to the needs of particular historical periods and reveal the fluidity of the Arthurian tradition. The key contributions to the myth identified below illustrate how Arthur came to fit these classifications and how the myth's influence spread beyond Britain's borders to reach a wider audience.

Arthur's the Warrior Nationalist

The origins of Arthur are remarkably obscure, as he first surfaces in Medieval Britain – “the shadowy history of the fifth and sixth centuries AD” (Mersey 9). Little recorded history of this era survives, and the reliability of these sources is often questioned, but what is known locates Arthur's origins in the national reconstruction occurring in Britain at that time. These circumstances establish Arthur's initial function as a nationalistic symbol. Britain had been one of the many countries assimilated into the Roman Empire, but the distance between Rome and Britain – not to mention the physical separation created by the English Channel – made it difficult for Rome to exert its influence there. Military conflicts between native Britons and outsiders, coupled with war on mainland Europe threatening the sovereignty of Rome, strained Rome's resources and prompted the Empire to pull out of Britain, leaving behind “a new, independent Britain faced with the overwhelming task of defending its citizens and cities from barbarian invasions” (Snyder 35). The exit of the Roman Empire proved bittersweet: it offered freedom to the Britons, but it also weakened their defenses and opened their borders to invasion by neighboring peoples.

The Saxons, a group of Germanic tribes from Northern Europe, were among those who came to Britain to take advantage of Britain's vulnerability and claim the “post-Roman riches ... there for the picking” (Mersey 10). Instead of merely plundering the nation, however, they began to settle there, a choice that instigated “a centuries-long struggle for control of the island” (Snyder 15). This conflict provided the impetus for Arthur's appearance. As Christopher Snyder writes, “The Anglo-Saxons eventually won the struggle, but as the Britons fell from political prominence they took heart in a heroic national past” (15). The exploits of Arthur, a British warrior credited for “uniting the rest of the Britons and leading them to a series of twelve great

victories against the Saxons,” was invoked to remind Britons of past triumphs and lessen the blow of their loss (Mersey 41). Arthur became a symbol of their British identity, free from Saxon influence, and bolstered the British spirit by giving them a folk hero to rally around.

Precisely when such stories began is unclear, for, as Richard Barber writes, “The records of the British past were handed down through oral tradition, and only a very small part of this oral tradition was ever committed to writing” (4). As such, it cannot be determined whether Arthur’s legacy began during the war with the Saxons – concurrent with when he supposedly lived and fought – or towards its completion, as a recollection of his battles.

This invites the question of whether Arthur – as a historical figure – actually existed, or if he was simply a heroic image created for nationalistic purposes. The answer continues to elude archaeological and historical scholars, and it probably will do so until the end of time, but it is necessary to consider because, as Barber notes, “Any account of Arthur’s literary career must begin by exploring the riddle of his existence” (1). Early stories of Arthur tie him to historical events, leading to the assumption that he did exist, but proving this is a difficult task, since there is simply not enough evidence to confirm or deny Arthur’s literal existence, though many attempts have been made.

While the question of Arthur’s authenticity is an intriguing one, and I am sure extremely valuable to the historical community, it is irrelevant when considering the implications the myth has had on individuals and societies. If the effects are tangible, then what does it matter if their source was real or not? As Snyder writes, “the fact that people from the Middle Ages onwards have believed in Arthur, and that writers and kings have used that belief to their advantage, means that his impact on history has surpassed that of a mere historical being” (17). It seems arbitrary to discuss the existence of Arthur in light of this legacy. Regardless of whether Arthur

lived or not, the Arthurian narrative holds meaning with the power to produce real consequences. As Snyder aptly concludes, “Like all myths it contains truths, though not usually literal ones” (8).

Therefore, it does not matter if early Britons believed Arthur actually existed. What matters is the nationalistic symbol he became. Arthur was a folk hero, “seen by Britons of the eighth and ninth centuries as a great warrior who was important in the early years of their long struggle with the Saxons” (Snyder 77). It is interesting to note that, early on, Arthur did not possess many of the traits he is commonly associated with today. He was not a king, nor did he rule any sort of kingdom; he was simply a talented warrior and a form of nationalistic nostalgia for native Britons.

This image of Arthur was first committed to paper around 830 in the *History of the Britons* (*Historia Brittonum*), a work credited to a monk called Nennius. Though the passage concerning Arthur in this work is brief, it is nevertheless important in establishing a “foundation for his career that would be taken up and expanded by such future writers as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace and Layamon” (Snyder 77). Aside from being one of the first to record Arthur’s tale in writing, Nennius preserves the image of Arthur as “the pre-eminent military hero of the Britons” (Snyder 77). Arthur, however, is not considered a king at this point: “He fights *with* the kings of the Britons, as the leader of the battles ... but is not himself called a king” (Snyder 77). His warrior status remains his predominant characteristic alongside his function as a nationalistic hero.

The next significant work in the Arthurian narrative is Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* (*Historia Regum Britanniae*), written around 1138. Like Nennius’ work, the *History of the Kings of Britain* was intended to be a historical chronicle of Britain’s past, but

because Monmouth consistently blurs fiction and fact, it does not fulfill this purpose (Mersey 59). As a mythic narrative, however, it establishes important details about Arthur, “stories and ideas that have been the backbone of Arthurian legend ever since” (Mersey 58). Monmouth’s work is often considered the true foundation of the Arthurian legend since it provides the first complete narrative of Arthur’s life. Important to this account is the recognition of people surrounding Arthur, characters such as Merlin and Uther who add another dimension to Arthur’s tale and “many of whom became stars in their own right in the literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance” (Wood 228). Arthur, at the center of this company, is also finally chronicled as a king. Daniel Mersey writes how,

In Geoffrey’s mind, Arthur had restored Britain to its true place in the world’s order, as the most sophisticated, courteous, and affluent country of all. In just over a decade, Britain had been transformed from a land of chaos and rebellion into a kingdom that all others looked to for inspiration. Arthur, without doubt, was Geoffrey’s greatest king of Britain. (65)

While Arthur is still recognized as a war hero, Monmouth retells his story and elevates him to the more powerful status of king. Additionally, Monmouth gives Arthur’s story elements of the fantastic, thereby increasing his heroic grandeur and making him more legendary. In his work, Arthur “goes beyond simply defeating Saxons, Scots and Picts: he also slays giants, holds lavish court pageants and chivalric tournaments, and defeats Roman armies in Gaul – twice” (Snyder 82). Monmouth’s Arthur is both a king and warrior of the highest order, contending with real and mythic forces alike, a portrayal that increased Arthur’s heroic image and advanced his status as a British national figure. Monmouth’s *History* would remain a popular telling of the Arthurian narrative for many centuries.

The Norman poet Wace provides the next addition to the Arthurian tradition in his work *Roman de Brut*, written between 1150 and 1155. Though the plot of Wace's tale is similar to Monmouth's, from whose writings he drew inspiration, Wace introduces two key motifs into the Arthurian narrative: "the Round Table, and the Britons' hope of Arthur's return from Avalon" (Snyder 89). The Round Table and its knights, arguably some of the most important elements of Arthur's tale, reflects "Geoffrey's description of the nobility and chivalry of Arthur's reign" and becomes a compelling symbol of Arthur's kingship (Mersey 71). It represents equality and the years of peace created and maintained by Arthur, thereby advancing an image of him as a just and effective leader. The Round Table also reinforces the role of Arthur as a king rather than as a warrior. Though the early years of his reign were still marked with battle and victory, Arthur the king was gradually becoming a more powerful figure than Arthur the warrior. This idea was further reflected in the belief that Arthur would eventually come back to rule Britain once more. Wace was responsible for predicting "that Arthur would return from Avalon when the time was right, and that the King and his knights had not died but were sleeping," popularizing "the idea of Arthur as the Once and Future King" (Mersey 71-72). This added an element of hope to the Arthurian tradition, as Britain could then look forward to a time when Arthur would come again and reinstate the peace he had created during his first kingship. Both themes recur in future Arthurian accounts.

Through these early works, Arthur's initial function becomes clear. In light of the British invasion by the Saxons, the Britons needed a symbol to remind them of their identity and the national unity they briefly possessed, and Arthur became this for them. In Nennius, Arthur is seen as a warrior hero, a defender of Britain, and a reminder of a glorious past. He rises to kingship with Geoffrey of Monmouth, through whom he gains renown and a fantastical back-

story. Both Nennius and Monmouth wrote with the intent of preserving the history of Britain, and their Arthur reflects this: he is a warlord king, a hero, and symbol of British nationalism. Wace likewise sets forth a powerful image of Arthur, but his work represents a transitional period, moving Arthur away from battles and towards his next role as a kingly entertainment device.

Arthur the Romantic Entertainer

Following Wace's work, it did not take long for the Arthurian tradition to receive another image upheaval, this time at the hands of French poet Chrétien de Troyes. Troyes' poetry, known as the French Romances, presents a different representation of Arthur and is considered among the more essential in the Arthurian tradition, leading Snyder to remark how the "overall impact of Chrétien's works, on the Arthurian tradition and on the medieval world in general, is incalculable" (107). Like his predecessors, he, too, is responsible for making major additions to the Arthur narrative, additions that would be firmly established in the larger tradition. He is one of the earliest authors to name Arthur's court "Camelot" and to describe it completely, but more important is the idea of chivalry and courtly love he advocates (Mersey 74). Writing from around 1170 to 1190, Troyes was heavily influenced by the politics of the French courts, many of which were "dominated by powerful women" (Snyder 105). Troyes' poetry was written, "in part at least, as entertainment for his powerful female patrons and incorporated ideas about the nature of love that were popular in this period" (Morgan 41). He integrated lofty ideals into his poems, including the chivalric beliefs that would become essential to the Knights of the Round Table and change the dynamic of Arthur's kingdom. It was no longer enough to be simply powerful in

battle – a knight also had to maintain “high standards of fairness, self-control, loyalty and a commitment to justice and mercy” (Morgan 43).

As an example of both the ideal knight and ideal lover, Troyes introduces the character Lancelot du Lac. Lancelot appears in Troyes’ third romance, which “focuses on the adulterous affair between one of the world’s greatest knights and Guinevere” (Mersey 74). Through Lancelot, adultery – also a popular aristocratic pastime – finds its way into Troyes’ work alongside chivalry and love, and Lancelot will come to figure prominently in the dissolution of Arthur’s kingdom because of his actions (Snyder 105). The character of Lancelot shows not only how Troyes’ poems provided further details about Arthur’s world, but also how the myth developed for a new audience. Lancelot and the other knights became the myth’s star attraction, while “Arthur himself is often located as an important yet peripheral figure ... He is a measure of status and power but he has a regal role rather than an active participatory one” (Morgan 42). Thus, Arthur has settled into his role as king and participates less in affairs of knighthood, remaining a passive symbol of virtue while his knights engage in the adventures of love and justice desired by Troyes’ patrons. Through his work, Troyes expanded the Arthurian audience, particularly outside England, and popularized Arthur as piece of entertainment celebrating courtly love rather than an evocation of nationalism.

The Vulgate Cycle, written by French monks, appeared after Wace and Troyes’ poetry and is notable for integrating the Holy Grail into Arthurian lore. This work, composed around 1200, is described as an anthology that “largely defined Arthur’s links to Christianity and the Holy Grail. ... a huge, sprawling collection of early thirteenth century romance” (Mersey 76). It focuses on the quest for the Holy Grail and the Grail knights who search for it, and Mersey appropriately summarizes the Vulgate Cycle’s role in the Arthurian tradition when he writes,

By including the Holy Grail, the Vulgate Cycle forced a new thread into seams of Arthurian literature. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur was simply a great king, strong in battle; Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian tales emphasised courtly behavior and romance; yet the Vulgate Cycle introduced ideas of Christianity and religion into the world of Arthur and, very quickly, the Grail Quest became a central theme of the legend. (78)

Like Troyes' work, however, the Vulgate Cycle relegates Arthur to a less involved role, instead focusing on the Grail knights who undertake various quests to find the artifact. Nevertheless, this work adds a new element into the Arthurian world, increasing its entertainment value by linking it to the predominant religion at the time. Christian readers of the Vulgate Cycle would understand the symbolism tied to the Grail Quest, a connection that made Arthur more relevant to their beliefs.

This next significant account is Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Malory's work is one of the most famous versions of Arthur's story, regarded by many as "the masterpiece which marks the culmination of English chivalric romance, the *magnum opus* of medieval Arthurian literature" (Snyder 124). Though completed around 1469, it rose to popularity in 1485 when it was printed as a book. The recent invention of the printing press, which allowed for mass production of the text, was essential in helping it spread, and it "achieved a wider circulation than any previous Arthurian tales" (Mersey 78). While Malory might not have added anything particularly striking to the Arthurian narrative in terms of content, the real treasure of his work is in his compilation of the varied additions of past authors. Malory's work sought to be a comprehensive reworking of previous tales that brought them together in one location. Snyder writes how, in seeking to accomplish this, Malory "chose some episodes and discarded others, creating a narrative chain that extends from the conception of Arthur to the death of Lancelot.

The achievements of Arthur (aided by Merlin) are recounted early on, then the emphasis is shifted to the adventures of his greatest knights ...” (124). By including the tales of Arthur and his knights in the same text, Malory provides a variety of perspectives and offers a well-rounded account of the events of Camelot. All the quests that pertain to Arthur’s kingdom are together, making Arthur more accessible than ever before. The printing press likewise helped spread Arthurian tales to a large audience all over Europe, expanding Arthur’s influence further beyond Britain. Malory’s retelling of the entire story revitalized Arthur, made him relevant again, and greatly influenced how he would be viewed by future generations, and because of this, Malory is well remembered for his ambitious contribution to the Arthurian tradition.

Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, Arthur’s role in the Arthurian myth fundamentally changes. Having moved out of Britain to acquire audiences in mainland Europe, Arthur becomes less of a nationalistic symbol and more of an entertaining character, adapting to fit both the political and religious situations of the time. Chrétien de Troyes romanticizes Arthur and his kingdom into emblems of love and chivalry, turning Arthur into a perfected piece of entertainment, a fantasy dream for the nobility. The Vulgate Cycle adds a religious element to Arthur’s world, aligning it more with the emerging religious beliefs of the time, and sets the stage for Sir Thomas Malory, who merges the efforts of his predecessors into one unified work, popularizing Arthur and increasing his entertainment value. The efforts of these authors set forth Arthurian motifs that would reappear in future variations.

Further Arthurian Variations

After Malory’s work, Arthur largely disappears from the literary world for nearly 400 years, and Wood acknowledges that, around this time, the “legend had run its course as a myth

central to the needs of political and literary culture in Britain” (244). No major contributions to the myth are made for centuries, yet despite its lacking popularity, the myth did not disappear entirely. Lesser-known works were still published until the myth resurged again in the Victorian era. In this new age, Arthur’s story once again changes, combining previous works and motifs with contemporary issues to become a more modern tale for a variety of audiences.

Arthur returns to popularity by the efforts of Alfred Lord Tennyson. Writing from 1856 to 1885, Tennyson’s work *Idylls of the King* represented “his grand scheme: to rewrite the Arthurian legend for the modern world, in a new national epic” (Snyder 138). The culture of Victorian England made it an ideal time for Arthur to reappear, as the virtues valued in that era resonated with the Arthurian motifs previously established by Troyes and Malory. One such image Tennyson latched onto was that of Arthur as a standard of excellence, and consequently, he presented Arthur in the image of a Victorian gentleman, “‘Ideal manhood closed in real man’. Victorian virtues are given human form in Arthur – superhuman form in Galahad – while modern sins can be glimpsed in the actions of Guinevere and Gawain” (Snyder 139). Though Arthur is once again decentralized – portrayed as a “stay-at-home figure, who sent his knights out to quest on his behalf” – the *Idylls* nevertheless embodied the values considered important to Tennyson’s age (Mersey 154). A renewed interest in pure love, for example, led Tennyson to focus on Guinevere’s role in his Arthurian tale. In the *Idylls*, she bears the blame for destroying Camelot by being unfaithful to Arthur and finishes her life at a nunnery to atone for this sin. By espousing relevant ideas such as this, Tennyson re-popularized the myth and made Arthur a symbol of his time.

Soon after Tennyson, Arthur travels to America where his tale is handled by Mark Twain. Twain adds to the Arthurian narrative an element of comedy, making Arthur an object of satire

in his 1889 work *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Nathan Comfort Starr writes how, "Before the nineteenth century ... comedic treatment of the legend is very rare," and describes Twain's work as "a piece of serious social analysis as well as a hilarious spoof on the days of chivalry" (109). In this writing, a Connecticut engineer is transported back to the time of King Arthur and tries to "modernize" Camelot, a scenario Twain uses to critique the romantic chivalry and idealized kingdom generally portrayed in Arthurian narratives. The humor Twain brings to Arthur's court in this work, in addition to his critical use of the use of the myth, makes *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* a valuable contribution to the Arthurian tradition. It also represents the introduction of an American interpretation to the Arthurian canon, further spreading Arthur's appeal from Britain.

A humorous approach was likewise taken up by British author T. H. White, whose work *The Once and Future King* – an anthology of four novels: *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, *The Ill-Made Knight*, and *The Candle in the Wind* – is another noteworthy addition to the Arthurian narrative. Written between 1928 and 1958, White's series is characterized by a humorous mix of "spoof and satire" as he "juxtaposes criticism of both medieval and contemporary attitudes towards war, and capitalizes on the incongruities without losing sight of the noble and the heroic" (Grellner 160-161). Reinterpreting Malory's work, White develops the Arthurian narrative in two distinct ways. First, he provides both an intriguing and entertaining tale of Arthur's boyhood, a subject only briefly touched upon in previous works. Primarily in the first novel, White "leads the boy Arthur toward the wisdom which he will sorely need as King. ... It is a wise book as well as a witty one, and its wisdom lies in the breadth and depth of Arthur's education" (Starr 116 and 122). Secondly, White gives Merlin a new image as a quirky character. Prior to White's installment, Merlin is seen primarily as Arthur's wise

adviser, an important role he maintains in *The Once and Future King*, but it has been altered to encompass a more comedic interpretation. White's Merlin lives backwards in time and knows the future because it has already happened to him, giving him the image of "the rather absent-minded, eccentric duffer of our own acquaintance – the man who lives alone in the country, surrounded by a confusion of odd subjects which reflect an active and original mind" (Starr 118). His education of Arthur is littered with peculiar and entertaining methods that both entice readers and educate the would-be king. Merlin is a prime example of how, throughout the text, White weaves together humor and the motifs essential to the Arthurian narrative, creating a retelling of the Arthurian narrative for a more modern audience. White's is the most influential work to be published in recent times.

These works of the nineteenth and early twentieth century provide further evidence of Arthur's malleability, presenting him first as a Victorian ideal in Alfred Lord Tennyson's work, and then giving him a comedic streak in Mark Twain and T. H. White's writings. These are further variations that reveal how, throughout the years, Arthur has been a hero, a king, a lover, and a moral beacon – a national symbol and an entertaining story. All of the aforementioned pieces of literature have been essential to the development of the Arthurian tradition, whether they established the foundational story of Arthur and his knights, retold it as time went on, added or subtracted, or provided a new image for a character. Through the efforts of writers such as these, Arthur survives, constantly being reinvented to suit the needs of an age.

These are general characterizations, as the more intricate details of Arthur's role in society cannot be clearly examined from such a distance. Nevertheless, these adaptations show the importance of the myth across time and space – it has adapted to serve whatever cultural

needs emerged in its place of appearance. To examine more closely how this process occurs, I turn now to a more specific analysis of Arthur's influence to consider the ways in which the Arthurian narrative was used in the later twentieth century.

Part II

A Land of Myth

The late twentieth century was an important period for the Arthurian narrative, one Michael Wood describes as the “greatest of all eras of Arthurian invention. The recent flood of books, films and pictures is testimony no doubt to the remarkable vitality of the legend, but also to a new twist in the tale: archaeology” (246-247). Modern archaeological studies, beginning in Europe around the end of the nineteenth century, ushered in quests for the “historical Arthur,” and with these quests came renewed interest in the myth surrounding the king. A wealth of adaptations exist from this period, coming from a variety of places, and each forms a new piece of the overall tradition. During this time, two very different cultures – Nazi Germany and the United States – also appropriated the myth, and through their adaptations, they made it relevant to their needs. Considering each of them in turn shows not just the fluidity of the Arthurian narrative, but also its ability to transcend cultural boundaries and become applicable to a variety of circumstances.

Finding Arthur in the Search for a German Identity

Many would not associate the Arthurian narrative with Nazi Germany, but hidden behind the racial pogroms and German nationalism championed by the Nazis is a distinct belief in Arthurian ideals. This is due in large part to both the morality and the social situation of post-war Germany. The Nazis came to power following Germany’s loss in World War I, a time when the national infrastructure was failing and the country needed strong leadership. Adolf Hitler appointed himself *Führer* – the “Supreme Leader” – of Germany in 1934 and began immense restructuring in an attempt to revitalize Germany, advocating for anti-Semitism, territorial

advancement, and national reform. Part of his plan was to revive a distinctly German identity and “conquer Europe for the German master race,” the implementation of which had far-reaching consequences, namely the genocide and oppression of millions of people (Altman 56). This search for a German identity is where Arthur fits in to the Nazi machine.

Nazi rule was characterized by a strong ideology of conformity, and as such, the Nazis sought to control all aspects of German life and construct it according to Nazi principles. This can be seen in their restructuring of the German school system, which saw Jewish instructors (or anyone who did not agree with Nazi ideas) removed from their positions, and in the Hitler Youth Organization, a group that “did not tolerate originality or individuality. Through military drills and marches, the Hitler Youth learned to think and act as one” (Bartoletti 28 and 42-47). By inserting Nazism into every aspect of life, that Nazi party forced conformity and found a way to dominate the German cultural scene. In the end, the Nazis decided what it meant to be German.

Mythology played an important role in the consideration of German identity, for, as Brian Fogarty writes, “All sorts of cults and beliefs arose to answer the question of what was true Germanness by tracing the culture to its aboriginal roots” (95). Richard Wagner, in his operatic reinterpretation of the Arthurian myth, as will be discussed below, instigated such a connection between the British myth and German culture and provided the Nazis with a way to romanticize their ideology. The Nazis used the power of the Arthurian legends to support what they believed to be true – the superiority of German Aryans and Aryan culture. By linking their racial efforts specifically to ideas of knighthood and the relic of the Holy Grail, both Hitler and his powerful subordinate, Heinrich Himmler, turned the Arthurian myth into a form of propaganda, advancing German belief in an Aryan elite.

Knighthood and the Holy Grail: German Arthurian Images

Hitler took much of his interpretation of the Arthurian myths from Richard Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, in which he saw the Arthurian narrative functioning as nationalistic – much like early Arthurian authors did. Wagner's opera is a recreation of the exploits of Parsifal (Percival), and follows the boy as he becomes a knight of Arthur's court and seeks out the legendary Holy Grail. Though Wagner's portrayal of this particular Arthurian tale follows the plot originally laid out by Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century, his work is distinctive in how it portrays themes that resonated with the German people. Martin Shichtman remarks how, "Embellishing received materials, adding a political agenda, Wagner transformed – in a sense, re-created – the Arthurian tradition for a German society seeking to valorize its own ideals" (139). Wagner, like Hitler, believed in the superiority of the German race, and he used the Arthurian myth as a way to accentuate Germany's need to reclaim its identity. He accomplishes this through the emphasis he places on the Holy Grail itself.

Because Wagner was working with an operatic format – with the plot conveyed through song and instrumentation – he needed to obey "the exigencies of drama by simplifying the action and dialogue" (Blissett 126). This created a greater reliance on themes to carry the story, and the Holy Grail provided Wagner with one such thematic symbol. In the Arthurian tradition, the Holy Grail represents an appropriation of Christian artifacts into the mythic stories and is usually depicted as "the cup used by Christ himself at the Last Supper and the same vessel in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Christ. In many accounts of the Christian Grail it is viewed as having regenerative, healing and nourishing qualities, both spiritually and physically" (Morgan 19). Many knights undertake quests to retrieve the Grail for Arthur, and Giles Morgan writes how these quests become "a major factor in the weakening and final break-up of Arthur's

mythical golden age” (72). No knight succeeds in bringing the Grail back to Camelot, making it an elusive symbol of renewal, a mythical object just beyond Arthur’s reach. Wagner capitalizes on the regenerative qualities of the Grail in his opera, making that element the theme of his piece, a choice that greatly affects not only the opera itself, but also its reception in Germany.

In the opera, Parsifal desires the Grail to help restore Arthur’s Camelot, and likewise, Wagner “sought to produce a rebirth in the soul of a people who had too long been deprived of their heritage; like his young protagonist, he desired nothing less than the restoration of a nation” (Shichtman 140-141). Wagner was highly influential in the German world, and his operas impacted a great number of people seeking to reestablish their German identity following World War I. As Fogarty writes, “For the Germans, the foundation of nationalism was their cultural identity, the idea of Germanness itself, which transcended political or class boundaries” (91). Wagner contributed to this cultural identity by seeking to create a “completely new and distinctly German musical form in his music dramas” (Fogarty 92). *Parsifal* therefore, through its musicality and themes of renewal and healing, is an example and affirmation of Germanic culture.

The opera’s Germanic elements and themes appealed to Hitler, who saw *Parsifal* as having “laid the foundations for the Nazi plan for national redemption” (Scruton). Hitler believed that “the poetic fiction conceals actual historical truths about racial struggle,” and found in the opera support for his ideas regarding racial purity (Finke and Shichtman 195). He is quoted as saying,

We must interpret ‘Parsifal’ in a totally different way to the general conception, ...

Behind the absurd externals of the story, with its Christian embroidery and its Good

Friday mystification, something altogether different is revealed as the true content of this

most profound drama. It is not the Christian-Schopenhauerist religion of compassion that is acclaimed, but pure, noble blood, in the protection and glorification of whose purity the brotherhood of the initiated have come together. ... joining the elite of knights who guard the secret of life, of pure blood. All of us are suffering from the ailment of mixed corrupted blood. (qtd. in Finke and Shichtman 194-195)

Interpreting *Parsifal* in this way, Hitler saw the Holy Grail not as a literal artifact, but as a symbolic one, the ideal form of renewal towards which Germany should strive – to obtain the Holy Grail was to create a society of pureblooded Germans. Accordingly, Hitler reportedly asked a friend, “Should we form a chosen band ... made up of those who really know? An order, a brotherhood of the Knights of the Holy Grail, around the Holy Grail of the pure blood?” (“Hitler (1/6)”). Here, Hitler invokes the image of knighthood to mythologize the task Germans had in creating a pureblooded nation, an idea that gave rise to knightly propaganda and the image of the knight as synonymous with the Aryan elite. The Knights of the Round Table represent the best that Camelot can offer, as both soldiers and upholders of right, and their inherent superiority provided an apt symbol for Nazi idealism and nationalism.

Two images, examined by Laura Finke and Martin Shichtman in their book, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, offer excellent examples of the adaptation of the knight. The first of these is an oil painting by Hubert Lanzinger titled *Der Bannerträger* (“The Standard-Bearer,” see fig. 1). This image features Hitler sitting atop a black horse and wearing shining silver plate armor highly reminiscent of that worn by medieval knights. He looks off the panel to the left and holds a large red Nazi flag that billows behind him. Finke and Shichtman write how, “In opposition to the contaminated, Hitler places his brotherhood of Grail knights. Only by correctly interpreting the old narratives and following the canons of behavior set down by the aristocracy

of the antique past can twentieth-century Aryans create a new paradigm to counter the decadence of modernity” (195-196). This image, by positing Hitler as a literal knight advancing the Nazi flag and looking towards Germany’s future, ennobles Hitler and sets him up as an example of a reinterpreted narrative. He is the leader of a new knighthood whose ideas will usher Germans into a new age, a man to be followed and emulated. This image, popular in its own right, was also reproduced on postcards and other forms that served to disseminate the image and the support for Hitler it embodies.

Figure 1: Hubert Lanzinger, *Der Bannerträger*, detail, c.1935. Oil on wood. Location unknown. <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3ktfFx4eyU%3D&userId=gDVDdTEj&zoomparams=> (access to ARTstor required)

The second image described by Finke and Shichtman is a woodcutting similar in nature to the painting done by Lanzinger (see fig. 2). It features “the profile of an armored man on horseback ... riding atop a mammoth horse that tramples the bones of those who have fallen in whatever battle he recently fought” (Finke and Shichtman 186). Prominent in this figure is the bold swastika emblazoned on the knight’s shield, printed in lines considerably thicker than those that comprise either the knight or his surroundings. The visual center of this work, the swastika represents what is important about this image: “[the knight’s] Aryan racial heritage and identity: this ‘coat of arms’ ... places the knight among world conquerors, uncorrupted and incorruptible” (Finke and Shichtman 186). This woodcutting, like the image of Hitler, helped spread the Nazi interpretation of the knight as the Aryan elite. The knight carries forth his shield – and the identity it represents – into the world, and serves to visually romanticize Hitler’s drive for a pureblooded nation.

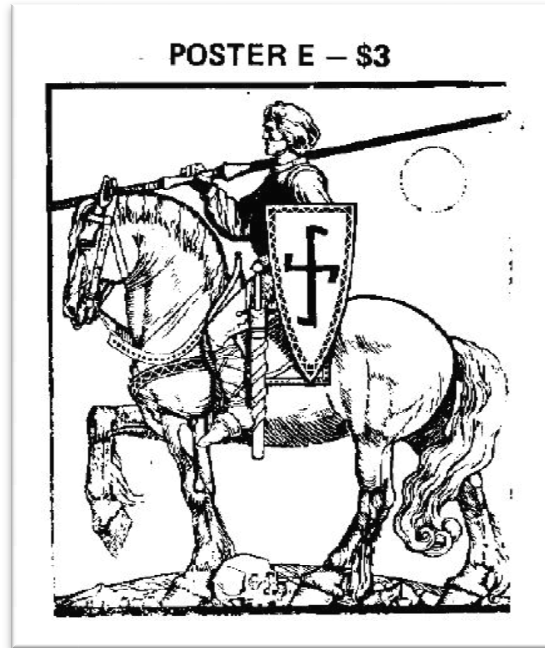


Figure 2: The image shown is a reproduction of the previously mentioned woodcutting, an image that appears in a National Socialist advertisement for poster prints. The original woodcutting from which this image draws is by Georg Sluyterman von Langeweyde, titled *Sieg oder Unsieg ruht in Gottes Hand! Der Ehre sind wir selber Herr und König!* (“Victory or Defeat rest in the hands of God! But we are both the Lords and Kings of our Honor!”) Its location is unknown. (National Socialist Flyer image: Subject Vertical File, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan. Used with permission.)

Mythologizing racial superiority by connecting Aryanism to the knightly order seen in the Arthurian myth proved an effective tactic for the Nazis, particularly when another mythic believer took up Hitler’s desire for knights: Heinrich Himmler. One of the most powerful men in Nazi Germany, Himmler is primarily remembered for his command of the *Schutzstaffel* (“Protection Staff,” known as the SS) and the key role this organization played in the Nazi administration. Originally, the SS functioned as Hitler’s personal guard, but under Himmler’s command, it grew into an elite military force involved in many areas of Nazi rule. Heinz Höhne, a German journalist and historian who lived during the Nazi era, describes the SS as “the terror of a nation ... mysterious, sinister and incomprehensible to the ordinary citizen” (1). Identifiable by their black uniforms, the SS fulfilled a variety of roles for the Nazis: among other things, they

were “in charge of the police and the secret service; they provided the sentries on the *Reich* Chancellery and the guards in the concentration camps” (Höhne 1). The SS were also responsible for implementing the Nazi pogroms – both in concentration camps and abroad – that resulted in the deaths of “approximately twenty million unarmed persons” (Mann qtd. in Rhodes 156). From 1929 until his suicide in 1945, Himmler held the highest rank obtainable in the SS and controlled the power of this formidable military force.

A fanatical elitist who supported Hitler’s desire for a superior Aryan race, Himmler was determined that the SS serve as an example of Aryan perfection. Himmler was a student of agriculture prior to his involvement in politics and believed that an elite could be created by “applying his professional knowledge of animal breeding to the official racial doctrine of the Party” (Höhne 52). He held SS members to a high standard of racial purity, limiting SS admittance to only racially pure men and requiring that their marriages be bound by similar standards. In this way, Himmler sought to elevate his SS to the ideal Aryan image, setting them above other Nazi organizations as the standard for which they should strive.

The Arthurian myth played a large role in Himmler’s beliefs, and because Hitler, too, connected with the images evoked by the myths, Himmler merged his mythical views with the power of the SS to mobilize his mythology in support of Nazi Germany. One way Himmler accomplished this was by combining elitism with the image of knighthood and integrating these beliefs into the structure of the SS. He approached governing the organization with the idea that its members were to be the “elite apparatus by which high culture is determined and transmitted ... not only carrying on the tradition of knighthood, but also representing an evolutionary leap forward – with an eye toward the next soldierly paradigm” (Finke and Shichtman 193). The SS men were, essentially, the new knights Hitler had asked for, an Aryan standard crusading for

racial purity. But Himmler went one step further than simply setting the SS up as a knighthood and also established his own form of the Round Table. Höhne remarks how the “tale of King Arthur must have impressed Himmler, for he never allowed more than twelve guests to sit at his table. And as King Arthur had once chosen his bravest twelve, so now Himmler appointed his twelve best *Obergruppenführer* [“upper group leaders”] to be the senior dignitaries of his Order” (151). Through Himmler, the Arthurian myth can be seen doing Nazi work, promoting racial purity through the ideology of the SS. Not long after instituting these doctrines, Himmler reached out for tangible representations of his knightly SS, as can be seen in his efforts to claim the physical Holy Grail and in his modifications to Wewelsburg Castle.

Making Tangible the Arthurian Connection: The Holy Grail and Wewelsburg Castle

It seems a logical next step that, after establishing his SS as a new order of knights, Himmler would embark on obtaining the Holy Grail – an object around which his knights could gather in pureblooded solidarity. Hitler had asked for a “brotherhood of knights around the Holy Grail of pure blood,” and although Hitler most likely was referring to the Grail in a symbolic sense, Himmler took it upon himself to reclaim the actual physical artifact.

Himmler conceived of the Grail as a legitimate relic, and believed that “the Grail belongs, has always belonged, and will continue to belong to Aryans” (Finke and Shichtman 208). Fogarty explains how the Nazis stripped the Grail of its Christian associations by perpetuating the theory that “Christ was a sort of proto-German and the grail he drank from was a pre-Christian Teutonic artifact” (99). This view of the Grail justified the Nazi appropriation of it as a symbol of blood purity, as in their minds, they were simply reclaiming something that already

belonged to them. Finding the Grail, therefore, was restoring it to its proper place in German society.

To accomplish this end, Himmler appointed German medievalist Otto Rahn to a position in the SS. Rahn had published a book in 1933 titled *Kreuzzug gegen den Gral* (“Crusade Against the Grail”) detailing his longtime study of the Cathar movement and his theories regarding the Holy Grail. Rahn believed that the Cathars, a heretical sect of Christianity targeted during the Inquisition, were the true possessors of the Holy Grail and that “the founders of the church simply Christianized a pagan symbol” (Jones xiv). Only a partial knowledge of Cathar beliefs and doctrines survives, since most of their written materials were destroyed during the Inquisition, and Rahn’s work traces what little is known in an attempt to locate where they might have taken the Grail. He follows the group to the “castle of Montségur ... a favored refuge for Cathars during the crusade and Inquisition,” and postulates that the Grail may then have been “brought to safety in the caves of Orinolac” (Wiseman; Rahn 177). Though Rahn did not definitively conclude where the Grail rests – though he proposes many possibilities, some more mythical than others – his work attracted Himmler’s attention, and he was brought into the SS where his findings might be put to greater use. Many believe that the Nazis sent SS members on quests in search of the Grail² – highly reminiscent of the ones undertaken by Arthur’s Grail knights – but there is little evidence to either confirm or deny this fact. Nevertheless, Rahn’s involvement in the SS reveals Himmler’s fascination with the Holy Grail and the value he placed on its symbolism.

Regardless of whether or not the artifact was found, Himmler’s knightly ambitions and his desire for the Holy Grail remain reflected in the monument that housed these ambitions: Wewelsburg castle. Wulff Brebeck, the director of the Wewelsburg Museum, describes

Wewelsburg as “the focus point of all the aspirations [Himmler] had towards religion, towards science, forming a new policy and things like that. It was the center of all these ideas, not of the practice, but of the ideas” (“Hitler (2/6)”). To the outside world, Wewelsburg was “the site for SS training” where SS members were schooled in “prehistory, mythology and archaeology,” but what else occurred there is more obscure (Coppens). It was a place “few outside the secretive elite of the SS had ever entered,” and Himmler ensured that the inner workings of Wewelsburg were kept secret, both during the war and after (“Himmler’s Castle 1”). When it became clear that the Allies would defeat Germany, Himmler sent a demolition squad to destroy the castle, effectively eliminating any documentation of the events therein (“Himmler’s Castle 1 and 2”). This, when coupled with the fact that no SS officer ever revealed what happened behind Wewelsburg’s walls, imbues Wewelsburg with an air of mystery.

Himmler saw Wewelsburg as his base of operations, “the ‘seat’ of his Knightly Order – a cross between Camelot and Marienburg – which would eventually evolve into a vast Teutonic Mecca, the spiritual centre of the Aryan world” (Brownlow and Turner). Here, he concentrated his mythological energies, first by setting up a round table in one of the castle’s rooms, where his “chosen few” would assemble in “high-backed pig skin chairs, each carrying the name of its owner knight inscribed on a small silver plate” (Höhne 152). He also dedicated castle rooms to prominent historical and mythological figures, filling them with “books and documents pertaining to the room’s subject” (Brownlow and Turner). Not surprisingly, both King Arthur and the Holy Grail had their own rooms.

But the most curious part of Wewelsburg is the North Tower, a place Himmler had “redesigned as a circular vault” (Coppens). Known as the Crypt, this room was not destroyed by Himmler’s demolition squad and remained structurally intact, yet little is known about what went

on there, as “not one of those who were present [at the rituals carried out there] ever divulged the truth” (“Himmler’s Castle 1”). Nevertheless, hints of Arthurian influence appear even in this enigmatic room. Brebeck identifies this when he says,

If we look around the crypt we see twelve stone plinths. We don’t know – as with many other things concerning this room – what was actually to stand on these plinths or be in the niches behind the plinths. However, the figure twelve – the number twelve – is interesting for several reasons, all possibilities. We have the story of the twelve Knights of the Round Table – the legend of King Arthur is certainly something that interested Heinrich Himmler... (“Hitler (4/6)”)

The fact that there are twelve seats and twelve plinths in this room leads historians to theorize that the room’s focus pertained to the twelve officers who made up Himmler’s inner circle – those who sat at his Round Table. Some have hypothesized that the room was intended to serve as a crypt for these men, “the scene of solemn death rituals. In the center, the wooden coats of arms of dead SS knights were to be ceremonially burned. Twelve stone plinths around the walls were to hold twelve urns, each of which would, one day contain the armorial ashes of a departed leader” (“Himmler’s Castle 1”). This theory sees the room honoring Himmler’s knights, adding to the overall mythological nature of the castle itself.

Regardless of what actually occurred at Wewelsburg, Himmler’s beliefs in an elite knighthood and the relic of the Holy Grail have led many to dub Wewelsburg Himmler’s “Grail Castle,” the place where “a fantasy of German history was made concrete: the myth of medieval knighthood and round tables and Teutonic knights” (“Hitler (5/6)”). Wewelsburg makes tangible the spirit espoused by both Himmler and Hitler in their endeavors to perpetuate a German elite.

Through the efforts of both Himmler and Hitler, the Arthurian tradition took on a new form. The propaganda created by Hitler's interpretation of Wagner's opera and the quests for ideal knights and the Holy Grail generated by Himmler succeeded in tainting the Arthur myth to support Aryanism and bolster Germany's nationalism. During Nazi rule, the Arthurian legend became associated with Germany and the Aryan race, mythologizing German identity and advancing their belief in what it should be while effectively returning the Arthurian narrative to its initial function as a nationalistic device. Seeing how Arthur was used to this purpose, let us turn to a second use of his legacy, that surrounding John F. Kennedy.

Presenting Kennedy as an Arthurian President: Jackie and *Camelot*

On June 11 of 1962, President John F. Kennedy told the graduating class of Yale University, "The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie – deliberate, contrived, and dishonest – but the myth – persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. ... Mythology distracts us everywhere" ("Yale"). While the Nazis saw myths as a gateway to truth, evidence for their belief in Aryan superiority, Kennedy saw myths functioning in opposition to truth, concealing from people the reality in which they lived. Though Kennedy's speech specifically addressed the myths surrounding the national economy, his warning applies to more than just government and politics. The illusive power of myth is "everywhere," as Kennedy stated, and he advocated for the need to find the truth hidden behind the façade of any sort of myth. When considering this advice, it is ironic that, only a year after delivering this speech, Kennedy himself would enter into history at the center of one of the greatest of American myths: the myth of Kennedy's Camelot.

In the Arthurian tradition, Camelot represents both the physical location of Arthur's court and the intangible spirit that Arthur's reign brought to the kingdom. Camelot is first described in the works of twelfth-century French poet Chrétien de Troyes, and it has since come to symbolize a peaceful realm with a model ruler maintaining that peace. Christopher Snyder provides an apt description of both Arthur and Camelot, writing that they are "idyllic and idealistic, a utopian dream for romantics and sentimental fools" (10). This impression of the Arthurian world, though moderately cynical, identifies precisely what draws people to Arthur and to Camelot – they are the standards of perfection, the optimal way of living against which countries and leaders can measure their successes and failures.

The Kennedy Administration was identified with Camelot following Kennedy's assassination on November 21 of 1963, largely due to the efforts of his wife, Jacqueline (Jackie) Bouvier Kennedy. Determined that Kennedy be remembered, Jackie "invoked Camelot as the symbol of her husband's Administration," handed it to the media, and "made sure the metaphor stuck" (Ferguson and Sachs). It was an appropriate and timely allusion, as Kennedy reportedly loved the musical *Camelot*, a Broadway show that "opened in New York the month after [his] election" (Casey and Casey 90). Jackie told a journalist how Kennedy "would play the title song as he fell asleep at night," an anecdote that "conveyed to the country her vision of the Kennedy White House as 'a magic moment in American history, when gallant men danced with beautiful women, when great deeds were done and when the White House became the center of the universe'" (Ferguson and Sachs). The success of the *Camelot* musical popularized Arthurian motifs in American society, making the connection between Kennedy and Camelot an easy sell. In the end, Jackie's efforts were rewarded, and the Kennedy Administration was henceforth known as the "Camelot Era," a posthumous legacy that has come to define Kennedy's overall

presidency. Tying Kennedy to this Arthurian image once again changed the function of the myth, this time turning it into a coping device for 1960's America, one that simultaneously emphasized Kennedy's attributes while covering up his faults.

Remembering the Good: Camelot Symbolically Restored

Jackie and the media's allusion to *Camelot* was apt for many reasons, not just because of the musical's popularity and Kennedy's affinity for it. Written by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, the show is an adaptation of another well-known Arthurian tale, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, and follows Arthur as he seeks to establish peace and order in his kingdom. It contains many traditional Arthurian motifs, such as Arthur's marriage to Guinevere and his establishment of the Knights of the Round Table, but it is notable for the emphasis Lerner and Loewe place on Arthur's youth and idealism. The stage directions state that, at the beginning of the show, Arthur is a young man in his mid-twenties, and his youthful ambition is revealed in the first scene when he tells Guinevere he wants to be "the wisest, most heroic, most splendid King who ever sat on any throne" (Lerner and Loewe 16). This desire leads him to establish the Knights of the Round Table, a new order he envisions using might solely "for right, to improve instead of destroy" (Lerner and Loewe 24). Arthur believes that the integrity of the Knights, in addition to his kingship, will help establish honor and peace in Camelot. Until Mordred conspires against Arthur, his efforts succeed; Camelot becomes a shining example of justice under his rule.

A similar spirit of youth and idealism was reflected in Kennedy's presidency, a correlation that strongly connected Kennedy to the Arthur of *Camelot*. Kennedy was 43 years old when he was sworn into office in January of 1961, making him the youngest man elected to the presidency. This fact did not go unnoticed by the American populace, particularly by the younger

generation, who viewed Kennedy as one of their contemporaries. Following Kennedy's election, Gerald Clarke, a journalist who was 24 years old at the time, recalls thinking, "This is the way it should be, this President was one of us. The government itself was ours – and the 'us' and the 'ours' were not the Democratic Party or the liberals, but the young and the vigorous" (13). The camaraderie evoked by such sentiments led to a sense of empowerment in the youth of America, or as Dan and Conor Casey note, "Everything seemed possible in a land where an Arthur look-alike raised the banner and dared a nation to greatness" (90). There was a spirit of "can be done" in Kennedy's youthfulness, a spirit Americans latched on to with vigor.

Kennedy nurtured this optimism from the beginning, calling for civic engagement in his inaugural address, where he famously said, "ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country" ("Inaugural Address"). America – and the world at large – could change for the better, Kennedy believed, if all Americans assisted in making this change. To provide one such opportunity for involvement, Kennedy founded the Peace Corps in March of 1961, a volunteer organization engaged in humanitarian efforts around the world. Programs such as this helped imbue Americans with the belief "that problems existed to be solved, and that the government could often provide the right setting in which to solve them" (Yarmolinsky). Like Arthur, Kennedy sought to create an America where "virtue and good works would be their own rewards," and considering this ambition, it is not surprising that many accepted Jackie's allusion to *Camelot* following Kennedy's death (Casey and Casey 90). In many respects, Kennedy's administration was Camelot symbolically restored, and the Camelot metaphor kept the spirit of Kennedy's presidency alive.

The final lines of *Camelot* were supposedly Kennedy's favorite, and in them, America found the words to express Kennedy's legacy. The show ends with Mordred, Arthur's

illegitimate son, revealing the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere in an attempt to break the order Arthur has painstakingly created and incite him to war with Lancelot. Mordred succeeds, and Arthur goes to war while facing the impending dissolution of the Round Table and the end of Camelot's peace. Despite this, however, the play closes on a hopeful note. Before the final battle is to start, a boy by the name of Tom approaches Arthur with the intent of becoming a knight, but Arthur instead enlists him to tell the story of Camelot to future generations. In the play's final song, Arthur states, "Don't let it be forgot / That once there was a spot / For one brief shining moment that was known / As Camelot" (Lerner and Loewe 114). Tom agrees to do as Arthur asks, and his acquiescence revitalizes Arthur's youthful idealism. After Tom leaves, Arthur tells his friend, King Pellinore, "I've won my battle, Pelly. Here's my victory! ... What we did will be remembered" (Lerner and Loewe 114-115). Regardless of what happens to Arthur in the final battle, Tom will carry on the idea of Camelot. Arthur's efforts will not be lost, and in that, he finds his victory.

Kennedy's legacy was not lost to history either. Just as Tom responded to Arthur's call to tell his story, Americans took up the role of passing on Kennedy's legacy. Seen through the lens of the Camelot myth, Kennedy's presidency became the place where, "'For that one brief shining moment' Camelot materialized. Merlin worked magic, and a legion of Arthur, Guinevere, and Galahad wannabes in modern dress converged on Washington to work magic of their own" (Casey and Casey 90). The myth called to mind all the positive elements Kennedy brought to the White House, leading Americans to perpetuate the Arthurian label and remember Kennedy fondly. While serving in this capacity, however, the Camelot myth also presents a skewed vision of Kennedy's presidency, as by focusing on his attributes, it hides some of his unpleasant traits from view.

Covering the Bad: Affairs, Bay of Pigs, and Vietnam

In the perpetuation of the Camelot myth, Kennedy's own warning about myths is forgotten. "Mythology distracts us everywhere," he said, and has the potential to conceal the truth about reality. As years have passed and the Kennedy Administration becomes further distanced from the present, people are reevaluating Kennedy's Camelot and discovering that, while there was (and still is) truth in the Camelot myth, the myth also provided a distraction from other truths about Kennedy. Adam Yarmolinsky, who served in the Kennedy Administration, comments, "Life was not always rosy, even in Camelot." Investigation into the president's life following his death, as well as a second look at his actions as president, have confirmed this, uncovering things about Kennedy that conflict with the optimistic image of Camelot. In retrospect, the myth can be seen not only preserving the spirit of Kennedy's presidency, but also functioning as a blind, rose-tinting Kennedy's administration and shielding his legacy from some of its less-than-admirable attributes.

The first crack in the Kennedy image came from a storm of personal allegations. As the media explored Kennedy's private life, revelations surfaced regarding, among other things, "extramarital affairs, his concealed health history, his suspected dealings with mobsters and the ways in which his father's money and connections smoothed his path to the top" (Lacayo and Cohen). While the factuality of these accusations is still debated, they nevertheless substantially damaged Kennedy's reputation and "nearly swamped the myth that Jackie had put together" (Ferguson and Sachs). Suggestions of an affair, in particular, threatened the inspirational power of the myth because the allegations disconnected the Kennedys from the image of Arthurian love they previously embodied.

Linking the Kennedys to Arthur and Guinevere was easy to do, as Kennedy's marriage to Jackie was a picturesque union. Both were handsome and well-dressed, and together they "communicated a sense of style that made everyone in the administration feel not only empowered but ennobled, or at least knighted – as befits one seated at Camelot's Round Table" (Yarmolinsky). The media portrayed them as a youthful couple in love, and so this was the image the American public internalized. And this image fit within the realm of Camelot.

In the overall Arthurian tradition, Camelot is at its best when Arthur and Guinevere are together. The musical *Camelot*, the specific Arthurian tale Jackie evoked as a metaphor, makes this concept clear in the first scene, where Arthur tells Guinevere, "That's how I became King. I never knew I would be. I never wanted to be. And since I am, I have been ill at ease in my crown. Until I dropped from the tree and my eye beheld you. Then suddenly, for the first time, I felt I was King. I was glad to be King" (Lerner and Loewe 16). Marrying Guinevere provides the necessary impetus for Arthur to realize his role and ambitions as king, and Guinevere continues to support Arthur's kingship as the play continues. Her encouragement convinces Arthur to go ahead with his plan for the Knights of the Round Table, and together they create a peaceful Camelot. It is no stretch to imagine Kennedy and Jackie in these roles.

But the tranquility of Camelot is broken when Lancelot arrives. In both the musical and the larger Arthurian tradition, Lancelot's affair with Guinevere plays a key role in the dissolution of Camelot and the Round Table. Not only does the affair undermine the chivalrous ideals of the Round Table, but it also incites Arthur to war against Lancelot, thereby breaking the peace of Camelot. Such a turn of events leads *Camelot's* Arthur to morosely remark, "The Table is dead. It exists no more. ... All we've been through, for nothing but an idea! Something you cannot taste or touch, smell or feel; without substance, life, reality or memory" (Lerner and Loewe 110-

111). The ambition and idealism Arthur propagated prior to the affair has disappeared at this point, leaving him with the collapse of everything he has worked to achieve. Only Tom's agreement to carry on the idea of Camelot – the time of chivalry and honor before Lancelot and Guinevere's affair – can convince him that his efforts were not in vain.

Just as Guinevere and Lancelot's affair contributed to the fall of Camelot, Kennedy's supposed affairs damaged his reputation, and by proxy, that of his presidency. Revelations that Kennedy's enchanting marriage to Jackie was tainted by infidelity altered the reception of the Camelot metaphor, separating Kennedy from the role of noble King Arthur and aligning him more so with Guinevere, the adulterer. The mythic legacy he had become associated with no longer seemed so idyllic – the image of perfection had been broken.

Adding to this disappointment was a second look at Kennedy's actions as president. Though he accomplished many positive things during his presidency, a more critical approach revealed that, as Yarmolinsky remarks, "Despite the relatively friendly domestic climate, the Kennedy years were not characterized by great policy achievements." Recognition of Kennedy's political failures served to pollute further the image of Kennedy's Camelot.

Kennedy became president in the midst of the Cold War and thus faced the challenges of being a leader during times of Communism and nuclear weapons development. One such problem was the relationship between communist nations Cuba and the Soviet Union, a shady alliance that led Kennedy to agree to the Bay of Pigs invasion. This initiative involved

"train[ing] Cuban exiles for an invasion of their homeland. The plan anticipated that the Cuban people and elements of the Cuban military would support the invasion. The ultimate goal was the overthrow of Castro and the establishment of a non-communist government friendly to the United States. ("Bay of Pigs")

Kennedy approved the invasion, but was “determined to disguise U.S. support” (“Bay of Pigs”). This made it quite problematic when Cuba discovered the plan and the invasion failed horribly; many Cubans invaders were killed or imprisoned, and the whole world knew that the United States was responsible. Furthermore, the failure at Bay of Pigs led to the Cuban Missile Crisis – the genuine threat of nuclear war created when the Soviet Union responded by secretly sending missiles to Cuba. Although the Kennedy Administration discovered the missiles, immediately acted, and successfully averted nuclear catastrophe, the Bay of Pigs invasion and the resulting nuclear crisis nonetheless damaged U.S. international relations and embarrassed the United States on a global scale.

But both the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis are overshadowed by Kennedy’s involvement in Vietnam. “Of all of Kennedy’s mistakes,” Clarke writes, “Vietnam stands alone, the most enduring and damning footnote to that dazzling inaugural day” (14). It is easy to overlook Kennedy’s role in the Vietnam War because his assassination occurred just as it escalated, but his military choices positioned the United States to engage in the conflict. Kennedy was responsible for drastically increasing America’s presence in Vietnam, signifying a stronger U.S. commitment to outside affairs (“Vietnam”). When troubles between the Vietnamese grew, therefore, the American forces stationed there became more involved in the conflict and withdrawal of their aid became increasingly difficult. Tensions between the Vietnamese peaked in November of 1963 when the South Vietnamese president was murdered, but Kennedy did not have adequate time to respond: a few weeks later, he too, was assassinated.

Lyndon B. Johnson took over the presidency and continued on the course Kennedy had laid: “By 1965, President Johnson authorized U.S. troops to begin military offensives and started the systematic bombing of North Vietnam” (“Vietnam”). Whether or not Kennedy intended to

involve the U.S. in a war is unclear, as statements made prior to his death lead many to question the future he had planned for the U.S. in Vietnam. Regardless, Americans found themselves in the midst of a long and costly war some felt did not necessitate their involvement. And as the President who initially increased U.S. presence in Vietnam, Kennedy bears a large portion of responsibility for the war that followed, in spite of whether that was his intention or not.

These events present a complicated view of Kennedy's presidency and altered the reception of the Camelot myth. While his establishment of the Peace Corps was admirable and innovative and his diffusion of the Cuban Missile Crisis nothing short of brilliant, Bay of Pigs and Vietnam cast a shadow over these accolades, and unfortunately, the failures are the ones more often recalled. While Kennedy may have brought Americans the Peace Corps, he also led them to Vietnam, and effects of the latter proved immensely more consequential. Reflecting on the role of the Camelot myth, it can be seen evoking the peaceful atmosphere of Kennedy's presidency while covering the more warlike actions that also characterized his administration, a role necessary for Americans trying to cope with Kennedy's assassination.

Why Kennedy Remains Connected to Camelot

Kennedy was murdered at age 46, still a young man in the midst of his first presidential term. On the day he died, Americans lost more than just their president; they also lost a vision of the future Kennedy had pledged to give them. Not only was his first term incomplete, but Kennedy also intended to run for reelection and usher in a changed policy, a plan Clarke recalls created a promising image of the future. He writes,

Again and again, the hagiographers tell us what marvelous things awaited us, next time around. The troops would have been pulled out of Vietnam; Dean Rusk would have been

fired; a *rapprochement* would have been achieved with the Russians and the Chinese. ...

Kennedy would have replaced timidity in domestic affairs with aggressive leadership. His commitment to civil rights and his awareness of the urban malaise were real enough, I think, but he was always afraid to link them with the action he so boldly and disastrously took in defense and foreign affairs. (Clarke 14)

The potential inherent in all of these actions disappeared with Kennedy, and the United States was instead required to face the fact of his assassination and the impending war in Vietnam.

Jackie linking the Kennedy Administration to Camelot, therefore, became a way for the American public to rally around the late president and the nation he had hoped to build.

Despite its problems, the Kennedy years were a time of “optimism, exuberance, expectation” (Clarke 14). The myth reminded Americans of this, and Clarke agrees that it “made bearable the unbearable fact of the assassination; it made it possible to blame Johnson alone, or primarily, for the stupidity of the [Vietnam] war. It was intolerable to believe that John Kennedy, who represented the best in us, could have prepared the way for the most sordid episode in our history” (15). In the wake of Kennedy’s death, focusing on the positive elements of his administration bolstered the American spirit, reminding them of the “sunny cold of the inauguration, when a bare-headed young president spoke eloquent words, proclaiming the arrival of a new generation of leaders and offering the prospect of new sacrifices” and allowing them to focus on something other than the life cut short by an assassins’ bullets (Yarmolinsky). Reality was suspended in the shining moment of Camelot, as the myth remembered Kennedy at his best, and that is what the American public needed at that time.

Though Kennedy’s presidency recedes further into the past every day, the image of Camelot continues to convey the unique atmosphere that characterized the Kennedy years. In

2001, Andrew Ferguson and Andrea Sachs questioned the continued survival of this image, writing, “it’s unclear what help the myth machine can be to them [the Kennedy family] now ... nearly 40 years after the death of Jack, for whom it was built.” Despite the fact that the myth is no longer needed to help cope with Kennedy’s assassination, I argue that the myth still has a place in the lives of the Kennedy family and the history of America. Flawed though the myth may be, it conveys the spirit of Kennedy and the American public during the 1960’s. It is as much a part of American history as Kennedy himself, and to forget the purpose of the myth would be lamentable. For the myth was not created primarily for the Kennedys. Rather, it was created on Kennedy’s behalf for the Americans who believed in him. It is easy to look at the myth today and ask what purpose it currently serves, seeing how fragmented and illusive it has become, and many continue to do so.

But the myth survives because in it, Americans found a way to remember their president, or as Clarke states, “We wanted to believe and we did” (13). History has affirmed that, although the myth has lost some of its rosy dreams of yesteryears, it still applies to Kennedy. As Casey and Casey write, the “Camelot vision has endured, perhaps a tad tarnished, but nonetheless intact. It has survived because it appeals to the popular imagination ... there is still abiding loyalty to a Kennedy myth that transcends the imperfections” (91). True or not, we want to believe in the goodness of Kennedy, and the myth helps us believe.

In the hands of the Nazis and the media surrounding the Kennedy Administration, the Arthurian narrative developed to become an important piece of both these societies, serving as a way to romanticize German ideas or as a tool to remember the best of an American president. The ways these two cultures adapted the Arthurian myth to suit their needs demonstrates the malleability of the Arthurian tradition and its ability to reach a variety of people, an element of

the myth that carries on into the twenty-first century. Because this century has only just begun, it cannot be said what sort of Arthur will come to characterize this era. Nevertheless, by looking at a modern adaptation of the Arthurian myth, we can gain insight to what versions will contribute to this overall image. With this in mind, I turn now to an examination of a contemporary Arthurian variation to see how it is currently working in the world.

Part III

A Time of Magic

The twenty-first century has only just begun, but society has nonetheless progressed far from the World War II days of Nazi Germany and the 1960's Kennedy era, and our culture has adapted to the progress of a new age. Such change makes it necessary to reinvent the Arthurian narrative yet again, for the myth that functioned for Germans and Americans in the twentieth century is no longer as relevant to the world today – the needs of their time are not the needs of ours. Therefore, how the myth is being used today, the ways it is currently being adapted, needs to reflect contemporary challenges. In considering this, I have chosen to examine a modern Arthurian adaptation: the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) television series *Merlin*.

Created in 2008, *Merlin* premiered to mixed reviews, but as the show progressed, it gained a faithful following and increased success. Over its five year span, *Merlin* averaged an audience of over six million viewers and was sold to “over 50 broadcasters in 183 countries internationally” (“Merlin”). In 2009, following its first season in Britain, *Merlin* “became the first British drama to be broadcast on US network television for three decades” (Heritage). Fans, with the assistance of the internet, also helped make *Merlin*'s presence known, and created a surfeit of websites, blogs, fictional stories, or fan art featuring different aspects of the series, keeping the show alive even after its conclusion in December of 2012. Although there are many things to love and hate about the show – as a number of bloggers and editorial writers have pointed out – *Merlin* is nevertheless endearing, and its popularity speaks to its power to engage the Arthurian myth for our twenty-first century cultural moment.

Merlin ran for five seasons – a total of 65 episodes – on Britain's BBC One network and the United States' NBC and Syfy networks. Set in the familiar medieval realm of Camelot, the

show follows the title character Merlin (Colin Morgan), a powerful young sorcerer faced with the burden of possessing magic during a time when magic is illegal and practicing it bears the punishment of death. Because he both lives and works in Camelot's castle, right under the noses of King Uther Pendragon (Anthony Head) and his son Prince Arthur (Bradley James), Merlin must exhaustively conceal his powers to avoid detection, a task that becomes increasingly more difficult when Merlin is appointed Arthur's manservant. Coupled with this new role is Merlin's discovery that it is his destiny to help Arthur unite the land of Albion³ and that he must protect him at all costs, meaning Merlin must find a way to simultaneously hide his magic from Arthur and use it to save him.

Though the premise of the show is new, it can also be seen engaging themes and motifs of its predecessors as it tells its tale. Merlin and Arthur begin their relationship on tempestuous terms, largely due to Arthur's initial role as the arrogant warrior, one similar to that found in his earliest literary portrayals. But gradually, like he does in the overall Arthurian tradition, Arthur moves towards developing his role as king, forming a strong bond of friendship with Merlin as he comes into this role and faces unrelenting threats to both himself and the kingdom. Greatest amongst these dangers is Morgana (Katie McGrath), filling the traditional role of Morgan le Fay as a formidable sorceress intent on claiming the throne of Camelot for herself. Arthur's half-sister and formerly an ally to both Arthur and Merlin, Morgana is ultimately responsible for Uther's death, an action that leads Arthur to take the throne. Once he is king, Arthur marries Guinevere (Angel Coulby), a conventional motif given added significance by the fact that Guinevere is Morgana's old servant and friend and that her marriage to Arthur serves to increase the enmity between the siblings. Morgana and her abilities consistently threaten Arthur's kingship, and Merlin's magic becomes a key factor preventing her conquest of Camelot. Arthur

likewise endeavors to keep the kingdom out of Morgana's hands, all while seeking to shape Camelot into the realm of peace and justice the Arthurian narrative has established it as. Morgana's never-ending attempts to usurp Arthur's authority culminate in the Battle of Camlann, where Arthur meets his death at the hands of Mordred (Alexander Vlahos), another friend turned foe.⁴ Morgana is likewise killed by Merlin, who then takes Arthur to Avalon⁵ to bury him. While there, Merlin hears a prophecy that Arthur will return to Albion when it needs him most, a prediction that ends the series on the hopeful note first established by Wace.

Central to this Arthurian adaptation is its strong emphasis on magic. Sorcery is often the underlying cause of the various troubles to befall Camelot, and just as often, it rescues the realm from them. Merlin is only one of many characters who possess magical abilities, and the talents of various magicians provide *Merlin* with an eclectic array of conflicts – some quite fantastical. Characters can be possessed by restless spirits, tormented by ghosts, controlled by mythical snakes, or forced to do battle with a legion of undead soldiers, among other things, elements that connect the story to older versions such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's, where such mythic quests also appear. Yet magic also serves as the healing balm to many of these troubles, revealing the powerful role of choice – sorcerers must decide how they want to use their magic, for good or evil. Merlin and Morgana represent the two extremes of this dichotomy and diametrically oppose each other for much of the series.

At its core, *Merlin* retains a more traditional Arthurian plot – Arthur becomes King of Camelot, marries Guinevere, seeks to establish peace and justice in his kingdom, and dies – but the show distinctively alters character roles and expository events as it develops this narrative. These changes reinvent the Arthurian myth for a modern audience, as several of the modifications reflect issues prevalent in contemporary society. This is especially noticeable in

how *Merlin* depicts sexual dynamics and how it levels the hierarchical distinctions of gender, race, age, and class. I will consider each of these elements in turn, as well as how they reveal *Merlin's* place as cultural representation relevant to our current age.

Redefining the Role of Sexuality

Courtly love and romantic conquest have long been features of the Arthurian tradition. Popularized by Chrétien de Troyes and his chivalric tales, many Arthurian stories depict the Knights of the Round Table rescuing a woman in need or wooing a woman to earn her affection, with Galahad, in particular, lauded as the “purest” of knights for resisting the lure of women. Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* has several chapters devoted to such exploits, one of which is aptly titled, “How Sir Marhaus, Sir Gawaine, and Sir Uwayne met three damosels, and each of them took one” (xlvii). Even Merlin is given a love interest occasionally. In many versions of Arthur’s story, sexuality plays a harsh role, proving instrumental in the dissolution of Camelot: Arthur’s tryst with Morgause⁶ begets Mordred, who will kill him, and Guinevere’s affair with Lancelot incites the war that gives Mordred the opportunity to do so. The consequences of these actions – aside from ending Arthur’s reign – present sexuality as destructive. Female sexuality, in particular, is perceived as inherently corrupting: Guinevere often bears most of the blame for destroying Camelot – as per Alfred Lord Tennyson – while Galahad is revered for forbearing women’s destructive influence. Because of the popularity of the Guinevere/Lancelot/Arthur love triangle, this negative connotation is preserved throughout Arthurian retellings. *Merlin*, however, presents sexuality in a different light by stripping Guinevere and Lancelot’s affair of its disastrous aftereffects and by opening Merlin and Arthur’s relationship to a queer interpretation.

In many ways, both Lancelot (Santiago Cabrera) and Guinevere are redeemed through *Merlin's* portrayal of their relationship, as it takes on an entirely different role in the series than we have seen in other constructions of the myth. To begin with, Guinevere and Lancelot's romance occurs when they are on equal terms, before Guinevere marries Arthur. Generally, Guinevere and Lancelot meet after Guinevere is made queen, creating a status imbalance that adds to the already taboo nature of their relationship. In *Merlin*, however, there is no class difference between them, a form of the class leveling I will discuss below. This interpretation portrays Guinevere as a servant in the castle, the daughter of a blacksmith rather than the daughter of a king, and Lancelot is likewise a commoner with no title, making his relationship with Guinevere perfectly acceptable.

When the two first meet, they immediately develop feelings for each other, but their romance is cut unfortunately short. Lancelot initially comes to Camelot because it is his life's ambition to become a knight, but because Uther decrees that only noblemen can become Knights of Camelot, he is denied. Out of a desire to help, Merlin forges credentials for Lancelot and asks Guinevere to help him carry out the ruse. When Lancelot's fraud is discovered, he is exiled from Camelot. Guinevere is upset at this news, fearing she will never see him again ("Lancelot").

But they do reunite, and Lancelot's return proves to be the most decisive encounter in their relationship. For three years, Lancelot travels, finding work entertaining wealthy patrons with his fighting skills; back at Camelot, Guinevere falls in love with Arthur. When Lancelot finds himself working for a man who has kidnapped Guinevere, they meet again. This meeting makes it clear that they still love one another, particularly when Lancelot tells Guinevere, "You have given me a reason to live" ("Lancelot and Guinevere"). Lancelot rescues Guinevere, and then Arthur appears with the intent of saving her as well. Here is where a major change to the

traditional myth is presented, one that alters Lancelot's relationship to Guinevere for the rest of the series: realizing that Arthur and Guinevere possess strong feeling for each other, Lancelot defers to Arthur. Although Lancelot has an equal claim to Guinevere's love, his selflessness and respect for both Arthur and Guinevere's feelings lead him to give up Guinevere. Once he is sure Guinevere is safe, Lancelot once again departs, leaving Guinevere with the message that "some things cannot be" ("Lancelot and Guinevere"). This decision alters the formation of the traditional Lancelot/Guinevere/Arthur love triangle and removes the element of courtly love and intrigue generally associated with this portion of the myth. It also recognizes Guinevere's feelings and her role as an active participant in her relationships.

Lancelot's exile ends when Arthur becomes king and finally makes him a knight, but though Lancelot comes back to Camelot and to Guinevere, he holds to his decision not to interfere in her relationship with Arthur. His interaction with Guinevere is limited, and when Merlin questions Lancelot on his feelings for her, Lancelot affirms, "My feelings do not matter. I will not come between them" ("Lancelot and Guinevere"). In both his actions and his words, Lancelot shows his altruism and his integrity, qualities he is sometimes denied in other adaptations of the Arthurian narrative in favor of the advancing courtly intrigue. In *Merlin*, however, Lancelot's chivalry – another prominent Arthurian motif – is emphasized instead. He is a man of both incredible skill and unwavering honesty who ultimately dies to save Arthur. Guinevere asks Lancelot to protect Arthur as the knights embark on a dangerous quest, and Lancelot agrees, pledging his life in Arthur's service ("Darkest Hour"). He means this literally, and when a sacrifice is needed to save Camelot, Lancelot takes Arthur's place and dies in his stead. At his funeral, Arthur praises Lancelot as "the most noble knight I'll ever know" ("Darkest

Hour”). Lancelot is buried with honor, his relationship with Guinevere never crossing over into adultery or treason.

It would seem that Lancelot and Guinevere’s connection ended here, but oddly enough, that does not occur. Over a year after Lancelot’s death, he is resurrected from the dead and he and Guinevere meet once more. Arthur intends to marry Guinevere, a fact that infuriates Morgana. She believes that she alone is worthy to be Camelot’s queen, and upon hearing of Arthur’s plans, she angrily declares, “I will not see that woman [Guinevere] upon my throne!” (“Lancelot du Lac”). To prevent Guinevere from becoming queen, Morgana intends to break up Arthur’s impending marriage. Recalling Guinevere’s former love for Lancelot, Morgana uses magic to summon Lancelot’s spirit, resurrecting him as a Shade – a shadow of his former self completely lacking in will and forced to do Morgana’s bidding. Lancelot is sent back to Camelot, completely under Morgana’s control, for the sole purpose of reengaging Guinevere’s love.

No one in Camelot knows that Lancelot is a Shade and not truly himself, as Lancelot invents an elaborate fiction to explain both his survival and why he did not return to Camelot for a year. The people of Camelot believe him and are simply happy to have him back. Guinevere is too, but despite Lancelot’s strange and unexpected return, she remains true to Arthur. Morgana, seeing her plan failing, intervenes once more, enchanting a bracelet to make Guinevere love Lancelot again. Lancelot gives it to Guinevere as a gift and their love resurfaces. Arthur catches them kissing in the Great Hall of the castle, and incensed by their betrayal, Arthur banishes Guinevere from Camelot. But Lancelot, under orders from Morgana, kills himself (again) before Arthur can pass judgement on him.

This final encounter constitutes Lancelot and Guinevere’s infamous affair, but *Merlin’s* portrayal of their duplicity undermines the destruction that is usually assigned to it in several

ways. First, Lancelot and Guinevere's original relationship and their affair occur before Guinevere is married to Arthur. So while Guinevere can be accused of cheating on Arthur, her actions do not carry as much weight as they would have were she and Arthur already married – she does not commit adultery. Second, Guinevere's actions do not prevent her marriage to Arthur; they just delay it for a while. In *Merlin*, Arthur comes to forgive Guinevere's actions and they are married only a few months later. From that point on, their relationship proceeds without a hitch. Lastly, Lancelot and Guinevere's affair occurs while both are under the influence of Morgana's magic and stripped of their agency. They are not acting on their own accord, and the series clearly implies that they cannot be held responsible for their actions. In the end, Guinevere and Lancelot's sexuality does not destroy Camelot, presenting a different perspective on this portion of the myth.⁷

Merlin also works to undermine traditional sexual boundaries in the relationship between Arthur and Merlin by opening it to a queer reading. Though the word “queer” is usually aligned with “homosexual,” theorists apply it in a different fashion, defining “queer” as encompassing “any practice or behavior that a person engages in without reproductive aims and without regard for social or economic consideration” (Murfin and Ray 421). David Halperin further describes queer as “*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (qtd. in Murfin and Ray 421). Queer theory, therefore, approaches works with the idea that “sexual identities are flexible, not fixed,” and it views “sexuality as performative rather than normative, as a process involving signifying acts rather than personal identity” (Murfin and Ray 421). Looking at Arthur and Merlin's relationship in *Merlin*, one can deploy queer theory to view them in a homosocial, if not homosexual, bond. In this adaptation, Merlin and Arthur are close in age – a concept I will discuss below – allowing their relationship to be based more on friendship than its traditional

mentor/mentee situation. While *Merlin* never explicitly develops Arthur and Merlin's relationship beyond strong friendship, it also does not discourage a romantic reading of the characters. Leaving this relationship open to speculation serves two purposes, at once allowing for an alternative sexual interpretation and undercutting the focus on Lancelot and Guinevere's affair.

The ten years that span the series follow Merlin and Arthur's relationship as it grows from initial hatred to close friendship tied together by mutual loyalty and devotion. The dialogue between Merlin and Arthur, in addition to how they relate to each other, allows a romantic subtext to surface, for as the series progresses, it is made clear that Arthur is Merlin's primary concern. He follows Arthur on numerous quests that threaten life and limb, willing to protect him at all costs, and the script – when paired with these actions – at times seems positively affectionate. When Arthur is uncertain, for example, Merlin compliments him and reassures him constantly, telling him things such as, “I’m going to be at your side, like I always am, protecting you,” or “I’m happy to be your servant till the day I die” (“Tears of Uther”; “Le Morte D’Arthur”). Arthur reciprocates in his own way, constantly asking Merlin for his opinions, trusting him with his confidences, or teasing him with lighthearted jibes. Arthur is just as willing to risk his life for Merlin's, not caring that it is uncharacteristic for a king to die for his servant, and he tells Merlin at one point, “I came back [to save you] because you're the only friend I have and I couldn't bear to lose you” (“Sword in the Stone”). Their relationship culminates in the final episode of the show, where a dying Arthur's final request to Merlin is, “Just hold me. Please,” which Merlin does, all the while begging him to stay (“Diamond of the Day”). Guinevere is never mentioned.

While Arthur and Merlin never have an overtly romantic relationship on screen, an argument can be made for their sexual fluidity. Actions that typically cue romance are plentiful in their interactions, and both the viewers and the actors themselves recognize that the bond between Merlin and Arthur is particularly deep. This recognition is what led Digital Spy Media to ask Bradley James (Arthur) in an interview prior to the premiere of season three, “Which do you think is stronger: Arthur’s romance with [Guinevere] or his ‘bromance’⁸ with Merlin?” (Digital Spy). James instantly responds, “‘Bromance’ with Merlin. It’s there for everyone to see. [Arthur’s] been ‘round for dinner at [Guinevere’s]; [Arthur] spends all his time with Merlin... No contest” (Digital Spy). This interaction reveals how important the Merlin/Arthur relationship is not just within *Merlin*’s world, but also to the outside culture that validates it. By highlighting their bond and making it a central relationship of the series, *Merlin* leaves room for a queer interpretation. Additionally, Merlin and Arthur’s friendship constitutes another form of love – romantic or otherwise – that distracts from the focus traditionally placed on Lancelot and Guinevere. In *Merlin*, Arthur has more than one important relationship in his life, and the narrative shifts to accommodate both. Merlin, however, has only one primary relationship, and that is with Arthur.

By removing the damaging aftereffects of Lancelot and Guinevere’s actions and adding a new layer to Arthur and Merlin’s relationship, *Merlin* alters a traditional Arthurian motif to address a more contemporary audience. We are currently living in a world where sexual orientation and gender roles are being redefined, and the growing acceptance of alternative sexualities and non-traditional lifestyles – particularly in the United States and other developed nations (see the debates surrounding same-sex marriage) – reveals that sexuality is an important topic of our time. *Merlin* can be seen taking part in this conversation. Its portrayal of Lancelot

and Guinevere presents a mellower version of indiscretion than is usually contained in the myth, portraying it as disruptive, but not destructive. Through this change, *Merlin* liberates their sexuality from its disastrous connotations and supports a less consequential view of sexuality – though there are consequences to Lancelot and Guinevere’s actions, they are not permanent and are rather quickly overcome. This does not occur in versions such as Tennyson’s or Malory’s, which see Camelot fall because of Lancelot and Guinevere. A queer reading of Arthur and Merlin’s relationship, meanwhile, allows an alternative sexuality to surface, one that reflects emerging relationship pairings. These adaptations regarding sexuality are one way *Merlin* establishes itself as an arbiter of the Arthurian myth for our cultural moment, relevant to the issues currently affecting societies around the world.

Empowered Women and Gender Equality

Merlin also makes the Arthurian tradition current for a modern audience through its portrayal of women and the gender hierarchy. Traditionally, in both the Arthurian universe and beyond, women function in limited roles and generally as stereotypes – the submissive wife, the damsel in distress, the enchantress, the aide, and so on. In Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, for instance, Guinevere functions primarily in the role of Lancelot’s mistress, rarely engaging in court affairs or anything that does not elevate Lancelot’s character. Additionally, women’s prime source of power is often their sexuality, as can be seen in the Arthurian narrative through the character Morgan le Fay (called Morgana in *Merlin*), conventionally portrayed as a seductress who wields her sexuality as a means of gaining power. *Merlin*, however, has its female characters step beyond archetypes to act in ways typically reserved for men. These actions simultaneously empower them and prove them equal to their male counterparts. While this

gender equalizing can be seen in many of the show's characters, it is particularly noticeable in the characterization of *Merlin's* female leads, Guinevere and Morgana.

Both Guinevere and Morgana prove capable of defending themselves – breaking the stereotype of the damsel in distress – by knowing how to handle a sword and engage in physical combat. This is a striking alteration, as in societies both past and present, men fight wars and women are kept out of battle.⁹ *Merlin* generally abides by this code as well, featuring a Camelot protected by a battalion of entirely male knights, but Guinevere and Morgana are prominent exceptions. They can hold their own, as is particularly noticeable in the first season when they join Merlin to defend his home village of Ealdor.

Merlin's mother comes to Camelot seeking aid for Ealdor after bandits conduct several raids on the village. Ealdor is a small town of subsistence farmers, and the frequent pillaging has exhausted their food supply and left them in danger of starvation. Ealdor does not lie within Camelot's borders, however, so Uther cannot help the villagers without declaring war on the neighboring kingdom; he thus refuses assistance. In light of this, Merlin plans to return to Ealdor with his mother and do what he can to help the situation. Guinevere and Morgana, who in the first season is still a friend to Camelot, resolve to go with him. When Merlin expresses his surprise at their commitment, Guinevere responds with, "You're going to need all the help you can get. I can mend armor and sharpen swords," to which Morgana adds, "And I know how to fight" ("Moment of Truth"). Guinevere's father is the local blacksmith, and through him, she came into knowledge of his occupation, while Morgana grew up in the palace and learned sword fighting as a child. Both these assets, aside from being useful to the current situation in Ealdor, show Guinevere and Morgana's command of traditionally male skills and set them apart.

Once in Ealdor, Guinevere and Morgana play an active role in both battle preparation and actual combat. The bandits are in the midst of another raid when Merlin and company arrive in Ealdor, and Arthur – having joined the group on the way to the village – immediately intervenes to protect the villagers. Morgana, Guinevere, and Merlin follow suit, and together they force the bandits away. At one point during this fray, Morgana deflects a sword blow meant for Arthur, and as she dispatches the bandit responsible, she nonchalantly asks Arthur, “Bring back memories of when I used to beat you?” (“Moment of Truth”). Though Arthur denies ever having lost to Morgana, bluntly responding, “That never happened,” the tone in which he replies belies the comment’s accuracy (“Moment of Truth”). Thus, viewers are left believing that Morgana has, in fact, bested Arthur, renowned as the best swordsman in Camelot, which serves to establish her not only as a woman who can use a sword, but also as a woman who can use a sword skillfully – better than Arthur and any other man.

Following this scuffle, Arthur rallies the villagers and begins training the men to fight in anticipation of the bandits’ return. Guinevere and Morgana, meanwhile, sharpen swords and gather weaponry so that the townspeople will be adequately armed. When the bandits do arrive and the fighting begins, the women once again prove just as formidable as the men. Morgana slays many bandits with a sword, and so does Guinevere, who at one point also beats down the invaders with a long-handled wooden peel.

Morgana and Guinevere also empower the women of Ealdor by convincing Arthur to let them join in the battle to defend their village. The women are willing to fight, but because they are women, they are not included in the group of fighters Arthur assembles. Guinevere and Morgana highly disapprove, for as Guinevere tells Morgana, “Men aren't the only ones who can fight” (“Moment of Truth”). But when they suggest to Arthur that the women be allowed join the

battle, Arthur brushes them off, saying, “It’s too dangerous,” leading Guinevere to harshly respond, “The women have as much right to fight for their lives as the men do!” (“Moment of Truth”). Seeing the determination of the women, Arthur relents, and the women fight alongside the men, beating away bandits with brooms, rakes, swords, or whatever is at their disposal. The result is that Guinevere and Morgana, in addition to performing in traditionally male roles themselves, enable the women around them to participate equally as well. Furthermore, this action complicates the chivalric idea of protecting women – a common theme in the Arthurian narrative. Instead of seeing the women only as objects to be protected, *Merlin* lets Morgana and Guinevere act for their own benefit.

The combat skills Guinevere and Morgana possess allow them to contribute to many quests throughout the series, but they reveal *Merlin*’s gender equality in roles outside this as well. Guinevere, once she becomes queen, proves herself the equal of her male counterparts on many occasions that do not require combat. This can primarily be seen in her interactions with Arthur and his court of knights. Contradicting traditional portrayals of Guinevere as a passive advisor to the king, *Merlin*’s Guinevere actively contributes to the kingdom’s governance, apparent from the beginning of the fifth season – the first season that shows her in her queenly role.¹⁰

Following three years of peace and prosperity in Camelot, Arthur and his knights discover that Morgana has returned and is once again rallying forces to service her vendetta against Arthur. She has made her base in an abandoned castle far to the north, where she orders legions of men to excavate the castle’s foundations in search of the key to Arthur’s downfall: an artifact known as the “key to all knowledge” that is supposedly hidden there. To more quickly accomplish this goal, she captures several of Arthur’s knights, including two Knights of the

Round Table¹¹ – Percival (Tom Hopper) and Gwaine (Eoin Macken) – and forces them to dig as slaves. Arthur, always loyal to the point of absurdity, pledges to go after them, telling Merlin, “I swear I’m going to rescue my men or die trying” (“Arthur’s Bane”). He poses this intention to his Privy Council and with them plans his course of action.

This Privy Council is composed of Leon (Rupert Young) and Elyan (Adetomiwa Edun), Knights of the Round Table; Gaius (Richard Wilson), the court physician and Arthur’s longtime adviser; Merlin; and Guinevere. This is an unusual assembly, but it is worth noting that Guinevere – a woman – is included in this inner council. Additionally, Guinevere is the only woman to sit at the Round Table, a privilege usually reserved solely for the king and his knights. If Guinevere’s admittance to these powerful groups were not enough to establish her equal status with those around her, she goes on to prove her equivalence by speaking out during the Privy Council meeting. While Arthur is contemplating the path to Morgana’s fortress, Guinevere interjects, saying, “May I make a suggestion? What if you were to take a different route? Approach Ismere [the location of Morgana’s castle] from the West” (“Arthur’s Bane”). This plan would give Arthur’s offensive an element of surprise and greatly increase its chances of success, so the Council agrees to use this approach. This affirmation shows that Guinevere, as a woman, not only contributes valuable information, but is also taken seriously by the men around her. Her power in this situation comes from her intelligence, not her sexuality, and she appears on equal terms as her companions.

This intelligence is further seen in how Guinevere rules Camelot while Arthur is away, such as when he embarks on the aforementioned quest to save his men. Guinevere acts as queen regent in his absence, but she does not sit passively in this role and wait for Arthur’s return; rather, she takes on the responsibilities of the kingdom and proves capable of governing justly

and wisely. She is seen attending councils and signing documents, and when a traitor emerges in the castle, Guinevere interrogates her, gains her confession, and then passes the appropriate sentence (“Arthur’s Bane”). When Arthur dies at the end of season five, Guinevere is given the royal seal of Camelot and her role as regent is made permanent. This diverges from previous versions such as Malory’s and Tennyson’s where Guinevere is not allowed such a role; instead, she becomes a nun and Abbess to atone for her treasonous and adulterous actions (Malory 884-885). *Merlin’s* acceptance of Guinevere as queen makes her one of only two queens in Albion – the other being Queen Annis of Caerleon (Lindsay Duncan), who also takes the throne following her husband’s death and is a strong female leader.¹²

Morgana, likewise, steps beyond her role as the traditional evil sorceress in choosing how she acquires power, using methods other than her sexuality. Throughout the series, Morgana is vocal in establishing her competence, despite being raised as a woman of the court, and this comes through in both her early and later character. While still living at Camelot, she is adamant about helping Arthur on his various quests, at one point bluntly telling him, “Why let the boys have all the fun?” (“Poisoned Chalice”). She retains this determination when she turns against Camelot, and although she allies herself with many powerful men, she never lets them obtain dominance over her. This can be seen in her relationship with Ruadan (Liam Cunningham), the sorcerer who helps her search for the key to Arthur’s downfall. Ruadan tries on several occasions to gain authority over Morgana, often by challenging her emotional stability. When Morgana becomes anxious about their lack of progress, for example, he condescends to her and tells her to be patient, resulting in the following conversation between them:

RUADAN: Calm yourself. There’s nothing to worry about.

MORGANA: You’re wrong; we’re running out of time.

RUADAN: The prophecies do not lie. Arthur's bane is real. Once it is known to us, his end is nigh.

MORGANA: So you keep saying, yet you cannot tell me what it is. ... For three months we've been searching and what have we found? Nothing.

RUADAN: It is but a moment compared to the eternity of knowledge the key will bring.

MORGANA: If I find that you've lied to me...

RUADAN: Patience is the stepping-stone to wisdom, Morgana.

MORGANA: You think I don't know that after all I've been through? For two long years, I saw nothing but darkness. Patience and I are old friends. ("Arthur's Bane")

Morgana meets each comment Ruadan makes with one of her own, thereby keeping him in his place and asserting her authority. She also threatens him, knowing that her magical powers exceed his and that she can control him forcibly if need be. Each time she makes an alliance, she interacts with the male leaders in a similar fashion, using her quick tongue and her magic to establish the fear and power she needs to command. Her sexuality is never brought into the equation as a bargaining tool.

Merlin's portrayal of Guinevere and Morgana, in addition to other women not discussed here,¹³ is distinctive in that it alters the traditional myth to put women in positions of power that they obtain through abilities and merit. This conflicts with the popular Arthurian theme of courtly love, which usually sees women operating solely as objects of affection. As with the previous discussion of sexuality, these adaptations clearly serve to address a twenty-first century audience. Gender equality and women's rights issues have been gaining attention all around the world. Belief systems that view women as equal contributors are gradually replacing the established paradigm that sees women as second-class citizens, and *Merlin's* depiction of gender

roles clearly supports this change. The show's female characters are empowered beyond traditional stereotypes and participate equally with their male counterparts. Although they are occasionally discouraged from acting because they are women, they are never kept from acting because of this. Instead, they assert themselves and demand the equality they deserve. This stance regarding gender is another way that *Merlin's* adaptation of the Arthurian narrative makes it applicable to the contemporary world.

Racebent Casting

Merlin is also thoroughly modern in its casting choices, introducing racial diversity into the Arthurian universe. Historically, the Britons that comprise the Arthurian world would have been predominately white, and this racial characterization is often an assumed quality of the myth. *Merlin* however, diverges from that standard and has two characters of the main cast, Guinevere and Elyan, portrayed by black actors: Angel Coulby, who plays Guinevere, is biracial Black British and Adetomiwa Edun, who plays Elyan, is Nigerian and Black British. This alteration is evident from the second Coulby and Edun appear onscreen, and it reflects the racebent casting employed by *Merlin*.

“Racebending” is a contemporary cultural term referring to “situations where a media content creator (movie studio, publisher, etc.) has changed the race or ethnicity of a character ... with a resultant discriminatory impact on an underrepresented cultural community and actors from that community (reinforcement of glass ceilings, loss of opportunity, etc.)” (*Racebending*). Historically, racebending can be seen in blackface or yellowface characters in film or theatrical productions, but still exists today in situations where non-minority actors portray lead characters of color (*Racebending*). Though racebending is typically seen as a negative practice, it can also

have positive effects, “such as adding diversity or a new perspective to a story” and providing opportunities for people of color (*Racebending*). *Merlin* engages in this positive form of racebending in its active choice to portray Guinevere and Elyan as people of color.

The fact that Guinevere is played by Coulby is repeatedly discussed on the internet by *Merlin* fans, with reactions to this casting choice ranging from overwhelmingly supportive to horrifically racist. However, none can deny that having a woman of color as Arthur’s love interest is remarkable and different. Guinevere is traditionally imagined as white – a quick internet image search reveals as much – and her name even comes from the Welsh “Gwenhwyfar,” meaning “white shadow” (Snyder 84). In Lerner and Loewe’s *Camelot*, white actress Julie Andrews first filled the role of Guinevere, and Malory describes Guinevere as “one of the fairest alive,” which could be referring to either her skin tone or her overall beauty (78). Casting Coulby as Guinevere, therefore, opposes previous conceptions of Guinevere and changes the racial atmosphere of *Merlin*’s Camelot.

The same can be said for Edun as Elyan. Traditionally, Elyan is a lesser-known Knight of the Round Table referred to as “Elyan the White,” or in Malory’s version, “Helin le Blank” (Malory 616). It is unclear whether the title of “the White” denotes his physicality or his moral character, but regardless, he, too, is generally considered white because of the assumed racial characterization of the Arthurian world. In *Merlin*, however, Elyan is Guinevere’s brother and shares her skin color.

Seeing people of color in medieval England is unexpected, and many viewers objected to *Merlin*’s casting choice because it defies the traditional racial makeup of the time, seeing it instead as a bid for political correctness or simply bad judgement. Yet this argument of historical accuracy has little place in a series where historicity is largely neglected in favor of the larger

mythic narrative. Online blogger Eurasian Sensation, one of the many *Merlin* viewers who weighed in on Guinevere's casting choice, considers both sides of this argument in a 2009 post and comes to the following conclusion:

Since [*Merlin*] is apparently set in Britain circa the 5th Century AD, surely they should try and capture the feel of the era. Back then, ethnic diversity meant the Angles and the Saxons. But then again, the show has a friggin' dragon in it. And unicorns and fairy-type creatures. And Merlin shoots people with blue fireballs. So if you can accept all those things, why is a black woman too fantastical ... to fathom in a medieval fantasy series?

People of color were present in England during the Middle Ages, due to Rome's influence in England, but this fact notwithstanding, perhaps the BBC cast Coulby as Guinevere because they felt she was the best actress for the part. The appearance of racial diversity in *Merlin*, set in a time when little such diversity existed, should be seen as an affirmation of Coulby and Edun's talents and an active choice to acknowledge diversity rather than a casting error or lapse in judgement.

While Coulby and Edun's blackness is much discussed among for *Merlin's* viewers, characters within the *Merlin* universe never comment on it. Guinevere and Elyan are not treated any differently from anyone else, for better or for worse, nor are the other people of color in the production. There are other characters of color, such as the knights that join Arthur in the final battle and certain men that deal with Morgana, yet none are treated other than their specific character deserves. Such colorblind casting leads viewers to see *Merlin* as a world of racial equality where diversity does not determine how a person is treated.

Regrettably, racism is alive and well in society today, and by adapting the Arthurian narrative through racebent casting, *Merlin's* producers are trying to make a relevant point:

England is not monochromatically white anymore. Just like the rest of the world, it is populated with a variety of races, and having Guinevere and Elyan as people of color breaks the image of English as only white and forces *Merlin* viewers to acknowledge diversity. Although racial equality has come a long way from where it used to be, numerous social stigmas and stereotypes still surround people of color. The existence of such judgements is what fueled people's objections to Coulby's casting the first place. But such judgements are also being subverted and broken down in many places, and *Merlin* imagines a world where such racial equality is fully instated.

Camelot's Court: Coeval Protagonists and Common Knights

Another way *Merlin* draws the Arthurian narrative into the contemporary world is through its portrayal of the dynamics of power. The Arthurian legend is based on a Middle Ages feudal system, where class divisions were well defined and enforced and the class a person was born into determined where they stood in the chain of power. This hierarchy is usually maintained in Arthurian adaptations, as the monarchic structure it serves provides the backbone of the myth – it is because Arthur and his knights possess the power in Camelot that they are able to engage in their various quests and adventures. *Merlin* is no exception; it also characterizes people by their class. But where *Merlin* differs from other adaptations is how characters respond to these imbalances of power. Several characters, by their words and actions, challenge the dynamics of power in the series, with Arthur, in particular, serving as a prevailing example of this process. The people that Arthur surrounds himself with reveals *Merlin's* undermining of the traditional power hierarchy, especially when considering their ages and classes.

To begin with, it is noteworthy that the show's main characters – Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, Merlin, Guinevere, and Morgana – are all of similar ages. This is never explicitly stated, but can be easily inferred from both the appearance of the characters and the given age of Arthur. Arthur's age is the only one concretely established in the show, as during the first season, he has his coming of age ceremony, marking him as 21. Cues from lines and character interactions allow us to infer that he is neither the oldest nor the youngest of the show's protagonists, so we can approximate that the other characters are roughly between the ages of 19 and 27 during the first season¹⁴ – primarily young adults. The appearance of the actors and actresses playing these main characters supports this assumption. Regardless of their exact ages, these characters are clearly meant to be contemporaries.

This is especially true for Merlin. The entire premise of the show rests on the fact that Merlin and Arthur are approximately the same age, a change that seriously diverges from traditional Arthurian narratives, where Merlin is usually significantly older than Arthur – an old man serving as the wise advisor to a young king. In Lerner and Loewe's *Camelot*, for instance, Merlin takes on this image and is described as, “a rococo figure of a man, with a huge pointed hat; flowing, heavily embroidered robes; and the legendary apparel of wisdom – a long white beard” (3). In *Merlin*, Merlin occasionally takes on the likeness of a wizened old man, but only by means of an aging potion and only as a ploy to protect his identity. Otherwise, Merlin is a young man on par with Arthur. This closeness in age allows them to form a strong bond of friendship and moves them out of the mentor/mentee relationship that characterizes their interactions in other versions of the myth.

Additionally, having all the characters close in age places the nexus of power in the series with a younger generation. Much like the Kennedy Administration's use of the Camelot myth,

this alteration emphasizes the strength of youth, as for good or ill, the young adult characters in the series are the ones who act, who make change in Camelot. Placing the power with them can be seen as contradicting traditional power structures by taking power away from the older generation, in whose hands it usually rests, and affirming the influential power of young people. However, this may also be because *Merlin* is a television series, where youth in positions of power is a common trope. Regardless, this adaptation nevertheless popularizes the myth with a younger audience by giving them characters they can identify and relate to.

Arthur further undermines traditional power dynamics by disregarding class judgements and surrounding himself with people whose abilities are more important than their rank. In addition to his marriage to Guinevere – whom he loves for her intelligence and honesty, ignoring that she was a serving girl well beneath his rank – this is best seen through his appointment of the Knights of the Round Table. When Uther was king, he decreed that only men of noble birth could become knights – as is traditionally the rule in both Uther and Arthur’s kinships – but Arthur overturns this law when appointing his own knightly order. Three of the five Knights of the Round Table – Elyan, Percival, and Lancelot – are common men whom Arthur knights because he values their bravery and skill.¹⁵ When Uther expresses his displeasure at his son’s choices, telling him, “You have ignored our tradition, our ancient laws. You have allowed common men to become knights,” Arthur justifies this by responding, “And they are some of the finest knights that Camelot’s ever known. They would gladly give their lives for the kingdom” (“Death Song”). To Arthur, his knights have earned their place through their merit. He has no regard for the titles given to them by birth.

By elevating common men to knighthood, Arthur undermines class hierarchy and shifts established notions of power. His affirmation of these men supports the notion that power is not

conferred by birth, but is instead gained by ability, an idea that speaks to contemporary audiences through its support of equal opportunity. That everyone has equal chance to succeed has long been a utopian dream, particularly in American myths, and the rags-to-riches motif has endured in stories and popular culture because of it. A recent example would be the United States' introduction of this concept to legal language with its "No Child Left Behind Act" of 2001, an attempt to support disadvantaged students through educational reform. Whether or not this Act has been successful is another discussion entirely, but it demonstrates that equal opportunity is a shared societal goal, one worth striving towards. *Merlin's* Camelot is a place where Arthur has truly advanced equal opportunity, and Camelot proves to be a better place for it. Power is given to those whose abilities merit it, surrounding Arthur with a strong queen and loyal knights.

Arthur for a New Audience

In traditional Arthurian fashion, Arthur does not survive through the end of the series. He dies by Mordred's hand, but *Merlin* does not let his story end there. Instead, as Merlin grieves the loss of his friend, he is given another prophecy to hold on to and is told, "Though no man, no matter how great, can know his destiny, some lives have been foretold, Merlin. Arthur is not just a king – he is the Once and Future King. Take heart, for when Albion's need is greatest, Arthur will rise again" ("Diamond of the Day"). With this, the series closes with a modern-day truck driving past Arthur's burial place and Merlin, aged and with the long white beard characteristic of his traditional image, walking by, still waiting for Arthur's return. This ending, having endured since the time of Wace, gives hope not only to Merlin, but also to viewers who have walked with him for five seasons and believe in the world he was helping to build.

For *Merlin's* Camelot is a reflection of our own world, proving its relevancy on several occasions, such as its portrayal of sexuality, gender, race, class, and age. How *Merlin* has adapted these elements draws the Arthurian myth out of the past and into the present, replicating for viewers the challenges and dilemmas facing us in the real world while at the same time creating a world wholly not our own. By reinterpreting traditional sexual dynamics and leveling the hierarchical distinctions of gender, race, and power, *Merlin* provides an opportunity for all its characters to succeed and be accepted for who they are. Even Merlin, whose magic was hidden from Arthur until the very last episode of season five, receives acceptance from him. And despite this revelation going against the laws of Camelot and everything Arthur thought he knew about Merlin, he still tells him, "I don't want you to change. I want you to always be you" ("Diamond of the Day"). This is truly a message for our world, and in advocating for it for five seasons, *Merlin* firmly establishes itself as "the land of myth and time of magic" described in its introduction – a place where servants can do great things, the king is a leader as well as a friend, and common men are not common at all.

Conclusion

An Eternal Age of Arthur

In the context of this variety of adaptations and appropriations, I return now to my initial question: why is the Arthurian myth still around? What elements allow it to be recreated by societies as diverse as Nazi Germany, the Kennedy family, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)? Taking the myth as their own, each of these groups created an Arthurian story that fit their needs and the needs of their time. In doing so, they added another aspect to the larger Arthurian tradition. Having considered the ways these very different societies altered the myth, as well as how the tradition has evolved over time, what makes the Arthurian story so adaptable and timeless as to be continually reinvented over hundreds of years?

One reason the Arthurian myth is so pliable is that it has no canon version – no version considered the authentic, original Arthurian myth – to exist as a standard tale. Because of Arthur's origins in the British oral tradition, where bards and minstrels passed on the Arthurian tales and adapted them to suit their specific audiences, the stories had an adaptable nature from the start. Over time, as Arthurian stories spread, features and themes emerged as more conventional, established features of the myth, but even these were once adaptations themselves. Guinevere's relationship with Lancelot, for example, is considered a necessary component of the Arthurian myth, but it only gained semiofficial status after it was popularized and retold in twelfth century France, where courtly love stories were in high demand. The Arthurian tradition, therefore, is an amalgamation of different tales; what is considered the standard version of the Arthurian myth exists as a single thread around which an entire tapestry of stories are constructed.

This lack of a canon version opens many doors for new adaptations, which are not bound to adhere to specific, pre-established elements of the myth. While many choose to hew closely to the more established components of the tale, others disregard convention entirely and maintain only a few features of previous myths. Peter David's novel *Knight Life*, for instance, imagines Arthur returning from Avalon to present day New York, where he tries to start a political career in Manhattan. His Camelot companions have been reincarnated in various forms – such as Lance, the unemployed writer – and once again, his enemies try to thwart the nation he attempts to build. In this version, recognizable elements connect the tale to the Arthurian tradition, such as Arthur's drive in a leadership role and Morgan le Fay's insistence on destroying that, but David's new setting and reimagining of the characters at the same time creates something entirely different.

Another reason the tale survives to be rewritten repeatedly can be traced to the gaps in the text. Not every character or storyline is followed to completion, and Daniel Mersey notes how this benefits Arthur's survival by creating the opportunity for different cultures to participate in the myth. He writes, "The ability of Arthurian legend to incorporate characters from other stories or cultures has helped to ensure the longevity of Arthur's name through time and across the world; the tales are pliable enough to be adapted to cultural or regional taste" (Mersey 15). This can be seen especially with Arthur's knights. While many of the more famous knights (Lancelot, Percival) are given well-rounded adventures, some of the lesser-known knights are barely mentioned and are never seen engaging in quests of any kind. Such is the case with Elyan, a knight mentioned in a brief chapter of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* who is not brought up again following his introduction. In BBC's *Merlin*, however, Elyan is given a story and a purpose – he goes on quests with the other knights and assists in maintaining Camelot's security. Other

knights have been reinterpreted to fit within a specific culture, as Bernard Cornwell does when he “makes Sagramor a north African warrior (Sagamore – with an ‘e’ at the end – was a well established knight in Arthurian legend, but had no African connection before Cornwell’s work)” (Mersey 15). Developing the character of these knights provides one opportunity for new stories to emerge and new contributions to be made to the myth – from a variety of cultural standpoints.

Another component that aids in the myth’s longevity is Arthur himself, the man at the center of the narrative. Arthur is Camelot’s leader, and has himself been reworked a variety of times, appearing as a warlord, a romantic, and more, depending on the adaptation he appears in. He is not a static kingly figure, and the fact that Arthur can be recreated within this leadership role to fit the needs of various societies shows how effective his character is as a symbol of governance, an example of what sort of leaders are needed. As Mersey writes, Arthur “is essentially a shape shifter, who different authors have been able to cast in a variety of moulds to satiate the desires of their audience. That’s why we love him” (210). We hold Arthur dear because we imagine him to be exactly what we need.

Arthur as a leader is one of the many themes and motifs that recur, and the lessons inherent in the Arthurian tradition play a part in its recreation. Through its variety of characters and circumstances, the myth has the ability to address many questions surrounding the human condition – how to live together as a society; how to structure our world; how to lead; how to relate to a variety of people; how to love; how to understand human nature. Questions such as these speak to humanity across time, and they persist because they are unanswerable. Each new Arthurian adaptation is an attempt to make sense of these facts of life, and the Arthurian world provides a place where such discourse can occur.

And finally, the long history of the Arthurian narrative, with all its adaptations and versions, is part of why we continue to return to the myth. Over thousands of years, the Arthurian tradition has consistently proven itself applicable to a variety of cultural moments, changing as needed to become relevant again. It has established itself as timeless, emerging intact from the distorted propaganda of the Nazis, the media hype surrounding the Kennedy presidency, and the televised portrayal of BBC's *Merlin*. This endurance marks it as a tale for the ages.

Arthur's story continues to thrive, beyond the roles and adaptations considered in this thesis. I have only scratched the surface of Arthur's potential, and as time passes, the possibilities for the myth will grow, unbounded by time and space. The Arthur of today will not be the Arthur of tomorrow.

Notes

¹ Because the Arthurian narrative has been extensively retold in many different languages, there exists a variety of forms and spellings for nearly all the names included in the Arthurian tradition. *Guinevere*, for example, appears also as *Gueenevere*, *Gwenhwyfar*, and *Gwenevere*, amongst others. For this project, I will be using the spellings noted by BBC's *Merlin* unless quoting a work that spells them differently, in which case I shall defer to the author of that text and use their spelling.

² A popular culture reference to this can be seen in Steven Spielberg's 1989 film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, where archaeologist adventurer Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) is forced to race against Nazi soldiers for possession of the Grail.

³ Albion is here used as a collective term referring to the dozens of kingdoms that comprise the *Merlin* universe (of which Camelot is one of the strongest). Some *Merlin* viewers speculate that Albion refers to the present-day island of Great Britain, but the series itself does not explicate this assumption. It is Arthur's destiny to ally these nations to create a cohesive Albion and it is Merlin's destiny to help him do so.

⁴ Typically, Mordred is Arthur's illegitimate son, but in *Merlin*, Arthur and Mordred are not related in any capacity.

⁵ In this Arthurian adaptation, Avalon is a lake home to mythical creatures and powerful magic. It serves as a gateway to the world of the dead and is the burial place for many of *Merlin's* primary characters.

⁶ Morgause has a variety of name forms, but is usually portrayed as Arthur's half-sister and the wife of King Lot. Not knowing that they are related, Arthur traditionally sleeps with her to beget Mordred. This does not occur in *Merlin*, however.

⁷ Technically, Arthur's sexuality is not destructive either, since in this version, he does not have an incestuous relationship with Morgause. Though this, too, supports the alternative view of sexuality portrayed in *Merlin*, it is one I will not discuss here.

⁸ "Bromance" is a popular cultural term used to refer to affectionate or homosocially intimate relationships between men. It represents a combination of the words "bro" or "brother" and "romance."

⁹ The United States only recently raised the 1994 ban preventing women from serving in combat roles (January of 2013), showing that war is still primarily a man's field even in developed nations with relatively progressive gender equality.

¹⁰ Arthur and Guinevere are married in the last episode of season four. Therefore, while Guinevere was technically queen for the three years between seasons four and five, season five is the first time viewers get to see how she acts in this role.

¹¹ In *Merlin*, the label of Knights of the Round Table does not apply to all of Camelot's knights. Instead, it refers specifically to the men that Arthur knighted following Morgana's first conquest of Camelot – namely, Leon, Lancelot, Percival, Gwaine, and Elyan. Mordred joins this inner circle later, but is excommunicated following his betrayal. Therefore, while Arthur has many knights who physically sit at the Round Table, not all of them bear this exclusive title.

¹² A topic of discussion related to Guinevere's role as queen is Arthur's as king. Instead of being individualistic and dominating, Arthur is a ruler who listens to those around him – men and women alike. He respects women and possesses many characteristics society deems "feminine." However, contrary to the belief that this would make him a weaker king, it strengthens him and the kingdom. This is an important consideration, but space leaves me no room to discuss it here.

¹³ Other powerful female characters include Queen Annis, Morgause (Emilia Fox), Princess Mithian (Janet Montgomery), Isolde (Miranda Raison), and Nimueh (Michelle Ryan). Like Guinevere and Morgana, their abilities and characteristics make them empowered adaptations of Arthurian women.

¹⁴ The ages of the characters are generally established through social cues and character interactions, based on which many *Merlin* viewers conclude that Merlin is a few years younger than Arthur – the

youngest of the protagonists – and Leon is a few years older – the oldest of the protagonists. Merlin is generally seen as younger than Arthur by how the two relate to each other and the fact that the actor who plays Merlin (Colin Morgan) is a few years younger than the actor who plays Arthur (Bradley James). Leon is considered the oldest because he is a full knight while Uther is still king and in the first season, it is revealed that he knew Guinevere when she was a child. While these ages are by no means definitive, they offer a range for the sake of this paper.

¹⁵ Gwaine could also be included in this grouping, but his origins are complicated. Technically, he comes from a noble family and is eligible for knighthood, but events in his past have caused him to renounce this heritage and distrust the upper classes. Therefore, when he meets Arthur, he never tells him that he is of noble birth. When Arthur knights him, he does so with the understanding that Gwaine is a common man, much like Lancelot, Elyan, and Percival –valuing his abilities above all else. So while Gwaine could be included in this discussion of common knights, I have chosen to leave him out because – regardless of how he was judged by Arthur – his true birth invalidates this claim.

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